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Nerd Up: The Rise of Nerd Media and the Co-Optation of Narrative in Advertising

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Nerd Up:
The Rise of Nerd Media and the Co-Optation of Narrative in Advertising
An Honors Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of Rhetoric
Bates College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
by
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Lewiston, Maine
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To Professor Nero:

Thank you for giving me your utmost support during this project. You gave me the freedom to pursue my own topic without impinging upon my ideas or trying to change my goals. I could not have asked for a greater collaborator or guiding influence. Thank you.

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Chapter 1: An Introduction to Nerd Advertising

Television advertisements reflect popular culture in order to produce the greatest impact on the consumer with respect to recognition and the creation of positive brand feelings. Such feelings are influenced by the strategic combination of an enjoyable narrative and a credible spokesperson that reflect the values of the brand. The formula seems simple, but it is difficult to achieve. A notable example is the case of Tiger Woods and Gatorade. In his prime, Woods reflected values of family, hard-work, and professionalism that made him an ideal brand representative. However, Woods became an equally ineffective brand ambassador following a series of affairs that led to the collapse of his marriage. Gatorade was forced to drop their sponsorship of Woods in order to maintain a corporate image and value structure that Woods could no longer embody.

With the reputation of both the brand and product riding on an advertisement, it is crucial that the commercial makes a meaningful and lasting impression on the consumer. Brands are not interested in selling a product to a consumer once; rather, they seek to create brand loyalty, or continued interaction and sales. Therefore, if an advertisement fails to convert a customer, it is possible that the individual will not switch brands in their lifetime. It is the goal of advertising to not only persuade and individual to buy once, but to develop a relationship that will result in future purchases.

In order to ensure the most positive response to the commercial, all brands must contemplate their image and message. The brand image is the reputation and credibility of the company or product in the eyes of the consumer. The brand message is any form of communication with the audience which seeks to inspire trust and confidence in the quality and values of the company. In television advertising, the fate of the brand image and the brand

message rests solely on the shoulders of the spokesperson. He or she must reflect the ethos and values system of the company in addition to delivering a trustworthy and credible message to the consumer. Also, the spokesperson must target a specific audience without offending or alienating non-targeted audiences. So how do companies decide the kind spokesperson that will be the most effective?

After an extensive analysis of contemporary advertisements, I noticed a trend in the type of spokesperson being used by numerous brands: nerds. This is a radical shift in the production of spokespersons. Traditional American advertising relied on the reproduction of heroic figures within the American Dream myth. For male spokespersons, this marketing philosophy produced hegemonic images of masculine, white heteronormativity; typically manifested in the form of athletes, wealthy businessmen, and adventurous heroes. For example, one of the most renowned ad campaigns in American history was the Marlboro Man. Created in 1955, the tough cowboy represented the courage and conquering spirit of the American Western Frontier narrative and employed a rugged image that made it cool to smoke cigarettes. Similarly, Mean Joe Green, a football legend for the Pittsburgh Steelers was the star of a 1980 Coca-Cola campaign that has over 2 million YouTube views thirty years later. However, if these hallmarks of American history are being passed up for clumsy, unassuming nerds, what is the motivation for the monumental shift?

I have assembled a small sample of ads that star nerd characters, and upon analysis, I have concluded that the rise of the nerd in advertising was brought about by shifts in cinema protagonists and in response to an exigence for a spokesperson that appealed to an audience that no longer identified with or was enthralled by the American Dream hero. This thesis will examine nerd advertising through the development of five component concepts. 1. The nerd is an

archetypal character who descends from a particular kind of trickster, the clown. 2. The rise of nerd advertising began in Hollywood cinema as a reflection of changing modes of film production, shifts in the American economy that redefined aspirations for success, and psychological benefits of laughing at otherness. 3. A television commercial is an extension of the Narrative Paradigm; which includes a recognizable story, persuasive appeals, and censorship for brand protection. 4. The brevity of the commercial lends itself to the use of symbols and concealed meanings that can be unpacked and analyzed through the study of semiotics. 5. The nerd was co-opted from its origins of otherness in film and sanitized for universal audience reception, but retains symbolic actions and language that may not be noticed by dominant, majority audiences, but can appeal to minority demographics.

The nerd is a recurring character in popular culture that has imbedded qualities and narrative functions, regardless of cultural context. Because of the widely understood dynamics of the nerd, the character merits inclusion into the spectrum traditional literary and media archetypes. As such, the nerd is a modernized form of the clown; he exists on the margins of society and appears at the focal point only to provide comic relief or useful insight. However, the clown is only a particular form, a human form, of an ancient archetype, the trickster. The trickster appears almost exclusively in animal form, but is reproduced in multiple cultures across the world.

Just like its nerd grandchild, the function of the trickster is that of an outsider. The trickster is not allowed to live within the boundaries of society because he cannot conform to human rules and he is a liminal character who transcends borders. As liminal character, the trickster can provide satire for comic relief, but can also provide cultural insight from an

unbiased perspective. The nerd, as a trickster, is a wise cultural critic and a trustworthy and credible spokesperson.

The next step in discussing the nerd is to pinpoint its rise to prominence and the reasons behind it. In early Hollywood narratives, there existed a dyad between Joseph Campbell's hero, the masculine champion of physical conflict, and the outsider. The Campbellian hero is a reflection of the dominant culture in which the narrative is produced. In the case of America, the hero was a reproduction of whiteness and white, Christian values. The outsider represented marginalized demographics within the society; in the context of America, the outsider was the African American, the Jew, and in some cases, the homosexual. However, in the 1970s and 80s, filmmakers such as Woody Allen and Spike Lee caused productions by minority individuals in Gay, Jewish, and Black communities to become more accepted and popular. As a result, the standards of normalcy were abandoned in favor of protagonists who reflected the director.

The 1980s also sparked the beginning of the technological revolution that swept the United States amidst the worst recession since the Great Depression. The revolution was facilitated by a new breed of American heroes; unassuming and nerdy intellectuals such as Bill Gates and Steve Jobs. Their successes produced admiration from the public and shifted the standards of financial success and security away from the brute force Campbellian hero, and focused on the knowledge worker.

Lastly, there are numerous psychological benefits of nerd protagonists because of their comedic value in film. According to Sigmund Freud, laughter allows the body to release stresses and soften the Super Ego. When the body processes humor, the Super Ego tries to protect the Ego, and the individual's self-image. If the Super Ego recognizes the suffering of an "other," it allows the Ego to rejoice in its superiority and feel a sense of joy. Because the nerd represents

minority demographics in America, the majority population receives enjoyment from feeling superior.

In order to understand the function of the nerd in advertising, a working definition of a commercial is necessary. The construction of a narrative is central to creating a television advertisement. Because of the time constraints of commercials, many ads borrow existing narratives from film or from stereotypes in order to provide context for the viewer without wasting time explaining the scene. According to Fisher's Narrative Paradigm, the most effective ads attempt to recreate reality and also make the story relevant to the consumer's life.

The second facet of a commercial is persuasive appeals. These appeals are employed almost exclusively by the spokesperson and are included in order to inspire trust, become likeable, and influence the consumer's psychological identity. Establishing trust and credibility is paramount to the success of a brand message because if the spokesperson is not believable, the brand will not be believable. Thus, it is important for a brand to choose a spokesperson whose values and persona match-up with the desired brand image. Spokespersons must also be likeable in order to generate audience attention and influence message recall. The final component of persuasive appeals is the relationship between the viewer's identity and the spokesperson's identity. Whether or not the viewer desires to emulate the spokesperson can be a crucial factor in persuasion.

The final component of a commercial is censorship. Commercials are intended to reach particular audiences who are believed to have the most buying potential for a certain product. While targeting is effective for the desired audience, there may be interested consumers outside of the targeted demographic. For this purpose, ads have to be careful about the directness of their appeals and consider the possibility of alienating audiences (Hooten et al 1232). Some audiences

are intentionally omitted from targeting in order to protect brand values and the values of their intended audiences. For example, many ads exclude appeals to gay audiences because heterosexual consumers may become dissatisfied with the brand's values. Martin and Gnoth write, "Since masculine men (1) tend to support the dominance of traditional masculinity, (2) are more likely to be intolerant of those who deviate from gender norms, and (3) strongly avoid associations of femininity in men, they should prefer ads featuring the masculine model" (Martin and Gnoth 356). Associating with minority demographics can hurt the brand image in the eyes of the majority; so many commercials remain homogenous to reduce the possibility of conflict.

Advertisements are loaded with symbols that rely on cultural knowledge in order to reduce the amount of explanation needed and conserve time. Although many symbols may not be apparent to all viewers, they can be unpacked and analyzed with knowledge of semiotics. Pioneered by Saussure and Barthes, semiotics studies the meaning of symbols in relation to the signified and the signifier, or object and meaning. Barthes studied semiotics in advertising and film in order to expose how corporate entities crafted messages to appeal to the bourgeois classes. Barthes saw his role, especially in *Mythologies*, as an intervention. He wanted to inform the masses about how corporations manipulated its audiences to encourage mass consumption of products. Consequently, semiotics is often used to evaluate the visual rhetoric and hidden arguments in advertising. For this reason, semiotics will be useful in decoding nerd advertisements beyond their surface levels.

The nerd functions as a vehicle for broad appeal because of the co-optation of otherness into the majority culture and the remaining symbolic language that appeals to minority demographics. Nerds in film are outsiders, yet nerds in advertising are symbols of whiteness. Nerds were figures of ridicule until outsider filmmakers like Woody Allen and Spike Lee

appropriated the figure and turned him into an image of coolness. Corporate culture has reappropriated this image to promote products. Reappropriating the nerd from outsidership reduces the character's association with demographics that can potentially alienate the dominant majority. In other words, nerd spokesmen must be cleansed of their outsider nature to ensure that the majority demographic can relate to the values of the brand and the image of the spokesperson. However, in order to appeal to multiple demographics, cultural symbols are implanted on the nerd that tacitly relate to minorities without alarming the majority. Also, the use of ambiguity allows the nerd to appear homogenized, but symbolically represent social issues and specific demographics. Therefore, the co-optation of the nerd into white culture has popularized nerd advertising, but has also yielded successful results in non-targeted audiences through symbolic appeals. This makes the nerd an effective rhetorical tool for persuasion in contemporary media.

Chapter 2: The Clown Archetype.

Joseph Campbell's study of archetypes in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* constructs a framework for narrative elements and lays the groundwork for more detailed analysis of characters as cross-cultural symbols. According to Campbell, all narratives are constructed using a universal template called the monomyth. The monomyth is a reflection of the human psyche and a reproduction of symbols and themes that work to explain the human condition without the context of place or culture. Campbell claims that despite cultural transformations, all stories are rooted in the same foundation (Campbell 3). Inherent to this universal narrative structure is the protagonist and his mission; the most prevalent is that of the hero, which exists cross-culturally and has similar plot elements. Campbell's observations on the universal monomyth allow for a greater understanding of archetypal characters and their function.

The analysis of the nerd's role in advertising begins with examining the origin of the nerd as a character and that character's place in larger narrative structures. When placed in the spectrum of Campbell's archetypal characters, the nerd's unimpressive physicality and lack of societal significance excludes the nerd from consideration as a hero. "The composite hero of the monomyth is a personage of exceptional gifts. Frequently he is honored by his society; a symbol of the germinal vitality of man surviving even the worst tides of catastrophe and sin" (Campbell 35). The nerd exists on the margins of society and is only included in the plot at select times for the purpose of comic relief. Given the location and function of this character, it is instructive to label the nerd in the archetypal category of the trickster; and as a specific type, the clown.

Who is the Trickster?

The trickster exists outside the realm of the hero and performs an ancillary function in the plot. The trickster can be cross-culturally defined by a broad spectrum of characteristics

including satire, irony, sexuality and disruption. Gates, who examines the prevalence of the trickster in African folklore writes, “Taken together, [these traits] only begin to present an idea of complexity of this classic figure of mediation and of the unity of opposed forces” (Gates 6). Therefore, although the complexity of the trickster can be manifested in many different forms, he is above all else, an intermediary; but an intermediary for opposing ideals or realms: human and divine, male and female, animal and human. The trickster creates chaos and challenges a static view of society.

As an agent of disruption and chaos, the trickster is a primal representation of human nature. He is not permitted to function within the bounds of society and must live among the animals, of which he is often compared. These manifestations will be discussed in greater depth later in this chapter. The liberation from society created by the animal forms allow the trickster to live as he pleases and without judgment. For this reason, many of the trickster’s actions are in defiance of social norms. Most notably, the trickster is commonly seen satisfying physical and sexual desires, deceiving the public through trickery and shape-shifting, as well satirizing the conventions of society. Henry Louis Gates and Paul Radin present classic cases of the trickster as a monkey in African and African American folklore, and as a coyote in Winnebago tradition, respectively.

The trickster’s communion with nature often manifests itself in his representation as an animal. This is a key component of the trickster’s identity, because although the character can take human form, the trickster’s inner animal spirit provides proof that he is unsuitable for life among humans. The animal form of the trickster is not arbitrary, and is a symbolic representation of cunning. Commonly, the trickster takes the form of a fox or coyote, but can also be represented by a spider or monkey in some cultures (Radin 187). The trickster exists as an

animal because his actions and characteristics are more easily ascribed to a non-human being. In other words, because the trickster defies social conventions for human behavior, he cannot be considered fully human. In light of the trickster's cunning, primal instincts, and inability to exclusively live in the human world, he is more identifiable with creatures in nature.

The Function of the Trickster

Paul Radin asserts that the function of trickster mythology is to create disorder in the plot of a narrative and to both challenge and destroy societal boundaries (Radin 185). Disorder is a key function of this character because it displays a consciousness of societal conventions and the benefits of exploring alternatives. By challenging norms, the trickster exposes flaws in society and extols an opposing lifestyle that is absent of structure and rules. In the case of Wakdjunkaga, the Winnebago trickster, he abandons societal definitions of gender and sexuality by shedding his masculine form and marrying the chief's son (Radin 24). By doing so, the trickster satirizes society's reverence of marriage by desecrating a meaningful ritual that is useless in the trickster's eyes.

The trickster embraces the role of the outcast, and martyrs his social self for the good of society. Frenzt refers to the trickster as an outlaw who destroys barriers and social structures in order to spare the well being of the individual (Frenzt 150). The trickster knowingly defies conventions in order to make a noticeable example and inspire society to adopt his radical perspective and perform as he does. Vizenor argues that the performance of the trickster promotes social freedom by contesting the limits of allegedly free societies. "The trickster is agonistic imagination and aggressive liberation, a 'doing' in narrative points of view and outside the imposed structures" (Vizenor 285). In so doing, the trickster illustrates that the individual license of the person is at stake within every society. There is an alternative to living within the

boundaries of expectations, and one could easily abandon a life of order for a life of desire and appetite. Theorists argue that the trickster satirizes the opposing extremes of society, allowing the individual to negotiate his or her desires within the context of society.

The trickster's license privileges the notion of diverse physical experiences; another one of the character's defining traits. Whereas the trickster is free to act in accordance with his own desires, he is also free to remove himself from a certain culture and experience life outside of society. This produces an understanding of other cultural practices that allows the trickster to improve his societal criticism. Radin asserts that men and women alone can only perceive his reality through one lens, but with the trickster as a guide or messenger for alternative realities, man can begin to view the world from a different perspective.

The final characteristic of trickster narratives is amusement and humor. Trickster narratives have two comic functions: they allow for the relief in the plot through self-deprecation and mischief, and they offer a satirical indictment of society. As a tool of comic relief, Frenzt states the trickster is a "rule-bending, humor-laced outsider" (13) and Vizenor similarly asserts that the trickster is "a communal sign in a comic narrative" (285). The trickster's humor is both a reflection of his mischievous nature, as well as its inherent animal instinct. The audience is intended to recognize the trickster's actions as ludicrous because of their departure from societal norms and also find entertainment in the baseness of his actions. Therefore, it provides amusement for the audience as it struggles to curb his instincts and become a functioning member of society.

The trickster's perception of society allows for a satirical commentary on the state of humanity. Although the trickster is perceived as humorous because he is unlike normal members of society, the trickster's actions are a direct response to the limits of societal conventions. It is

the function of the trickster to point out the freedoms that are abandoned by the acceptance of the social contract and the rules that restrict a lifestyle without consequences. By exercising his freedom to indulge in his desires, the trickster identifies the flaws of society and chooses to live and act in accordance to his view of what is right, not of what is expected.

Cultural Tricksters

The trickster form is always constant, despite different names and appearances in various cultures. Examples of the trickster figure are found in Greek mythology, Native American mythology, cultures of the African Diaspora, and American social culture.

The trickster of Greek mythology is Hermes, the messenger god. The trickster label is often ascribed to Hermes because of his penchant for thievery, and the shape-shifting deceit he employs to aid his degeneracy. But, Hermes' tricks and mischief are only superficial justifications for his qualification as a trickster archetype. Hermes' primary function as an Olympic god is the mediator between the Divine, metaphysical world and the physical world. As such, he is not a member of society, but possesses a deep understanding of the way societies should function and exposes these truths to the people. Both Radin and Jung refer to Hermes with respect to the trickster's ability to know many ways and deliver these teachings to society. "Hermes, too, operates outside the fixed bounds of custom and law. The trickster god is the transpersonal source of a particular life-style and way of experiencing the world" (Radin 190). Similarly, Gates describes Hermes and trickster figures in general as liminal characters that interpret and deliver the word of the gods to the people (Gates 9). These characterizations of Hermes expand his trickster function beyond a common troublemaker because his knowledge of multiple ways and presence in both physical and metaphysical worlds help expose the frameworks of society and the alternatives to a structured lifestyle.

In the Winnebago tradition, the trickster is manifested in the character of Wakdjunkaga. Wakdjunkaga takes many forms, but it most often represented as a coyote, a symbol of cunning and mischief. Wakdjunkaga exists in Winnebago narratives primarily for his comic function because the audience revels in his inability to recognize himself as a member of society; however, Wakdjunkaga embodies the archetypal characteristics of the trickster beyond purely humor. Specifically, Wakdjunkaga fully embraces his animalistic nature, and acts instinctively, rather than in accordance to convention. As such, he is an enemy of boundaries, specifically those set in place by the laws of society and his mischief is often in direct opposition to the norms of society. For example, although Wakdjunkaga is male, he satirizes marriage in Winnebago culture by transforming himself into a female and wedding the son the chief (Radin 24). This shows a blatant disregard for the norms of society and a specific desire to make a mockery of the tribe's way of life. Wakdjunkaga also defies convention by freely having sex. Radin describes Wakdjunkaga as sexually limitless and barbaric in the pursuit of carnal satisfaction (Radin 167). His sexual appetite is not different from that of man, but he refuses to be channeled into social structures. His willingness to act on his desires condemns the restrictions of society.

The trickster is a recurring theme in cultures of the African Diaspora. According to Gates, representations of the trickster stem from Esu-Elegbara of Yoruba mythology (Gates 5). Esu goes by different names in countries such as Benin, Brazil, Haiti, and Cuba, but he is depicted in similar ways and with similar qualities. True to the traditional trickster form, Esu often appears as an animal, the monkey. Esu represents a primal appetite for sex, evidenced by his humorously large penis; which is a characteristic of most tricksters. Closely related to Hermes, Esu functions as a liminal character that bridges the gap between physical and metaphysical worlds. "Esu is said to limp as he walks precisely because of his mediating function: his legs are of different

lengths because he keeps one anchored in the realm of the gods” (Gates 6). Esu’s liminality is a defining quality of his trickster nature and is a reflection of his location in narratives. Because he is not allowed to exist completely in one world, he must function as an intermediary for both worlds.

Esu also represents intellectual power and insightfulness in Yoruba culture. He is commonly depicted as the keeper of *ase*, which is the spiritual power that created the universe (Gates 7). By holding *ase*, Esu is granted an unparalleled understanding of things; he speaks all languages, and his word is authoritative and wise. “It is the word with irrevocability, reinforced with double assuredness, and undaunted authenticity. *Ase* makes Esu ‘he who says so and does so’” (Gates 7). Esu’s role as an intellectual authority furthers his placement within the trickster archetype because he possesses a knowledge and critical eye that is not found in normal humans.

One of the most interesting recent examples of the trickster can be found in Norman Mailer’s *The White Negro*. In that essay, Mailer ascribes to African Americans the role of the “trickster.” Although there were no allegations of African Americans possessing shape-shifting powers, their status as societal outcasts allowed the white population to ascribe them traits of the trickster. The marginality of the black community allowed for a freedom from inhibition that would not have been acceptable within the boundaries of white society.

On his contemplation of the Hipster—one who lives for the present and accepts the impending danger of death—Mailer contends that black men provide the example for the Hipster, “It is no accident that the source of Hip is the Negro, for he has been living on the margin between totalitarianism and democracy for two centuries” (Mailer 3). After Mailer identifies the source of “Hip” behavior, he begins to describe the nature of the Negro in terms that reflect the form and function of the trickster. He claims that from birth, Negroes have two options, live in

constant danger or constant humility (Mailer 4). “So he kept for his survival the art of the primitive, he lived in the enormous present, relinquishing the pleasures of the mind for more obligatory pleasures of the body.” Mailer’s writings display the Negro’s relation to the trickster because of his marginality and primal instincts. Because the Negro is a social outcast, he like the trickster, has no use for conforming to the norms of society. This state of rebellion and disorder creates the freedom to live for the present that Mailer wishes were true of all human nature. One can see in Mailer’s assertion the idea of the African American as the trickster who lives betwixt and between. This is the image of the outsider. It is worth noting that this outsider in most cultures is an animal. In Mailer’s world, the animal in trickster tales is “the Negro.” One can see how Mailer’s argument is profoundly racist.

The Clown: the Defanged Trickster

“Trickster energy is expansive enough to take many different forms and one form in the clown” (Bala 53). The clown is a sub-category of the trickster character, but its primary function is the beneficent creation of comedy, rather than the creation of disorder. This primary comic function is to elicit laughter from the audience, and laughter is the key to the clown’s acceptance in society. However, laughter does not only give the clown value in society, laughter is a defusing agent that allows the clown to comfort the audience and create a space in which his own ideas and beliefs can be presented without contest or consequence. This is a reflection of the clown’s relationship to the trickster because his secondary functions are to purvey truths about society and humanity, as well as to permeate boundaries and present radical ideas as an agent of disorder.

This archetypal character category is the best fit for the nerd because the nerd employs humor to relate to his audience, but also recognizes truth and lives a boundary-free existence.

However, the prevailing reason why a nerd cannot be completely classified as a trickster because of mischief. The nerd is an innocent and unassuming character, whereas the trickster is capable of acting with malicious or selfish intent. The nerd figure does not possess the cunning mind or desire for chaos that is characteristic of the trickster, so a more fitting label for the nerd is that of the clown.

In light of the clown's difference from the trickster, it is an accurate assessment to label the clown as a "defanged" form of the trickster. The value of this assessment is twofold. First, the clown is a more effective comedian. The trickster, despite its humorous intentions, can often be a malicious force in narratives. As a result, the effect of the trickster's humor is overshadowed by unfavorable character traits. As stated by Radin, the trickster is most effective as a comedic source when the audience engages the character as a hopeless victim of society's ways (Radin 174). When the trickster acts as an aggressor and malevolent force, it becomes harder for the audience to identify with him and appreciate his humor. Therefore, the trickster as the clown can deliver humor in an innocent and non-threatening manner. This makes the clown funnier and easier to accept by audiences.

The clown must also be defanged in order to represent realism in narratives. The clown's origins come from the animal figure of the trickster, which is indicative of the style of myth. In mythology, humans convey their cultural histories through narratives involving the supernatural; including interactions with gods and talking animals. Thus, in order to separate narrative history from myth, a literal defanging of the trickster is needed in order to make the clown a human. The importance of abolishing the form of mythology is a response to the Renaissance movement of realism. Realism is foremost a style of art that seeks to represent history without the perspective of fantasy. "Renaissance viewers, unlike their medieval forebears, want to know what it is like to

be present at, say, the Last Supper. A conceptual style of presentation cannot hope to satisfy this desire to relive the past” (Tuan 439). This style of art grew to penetrate modes of documenting history and writing narratives. In the European countries affected by the Renaissance period of the 1400s, it was no longer fitting to include fictive elements such as talking animals in historical documents. “Historians in different cultures, tend to assume that their works have practical value. But history cannot really be useful unless it is grounded in geography and social science” (Tuan 439). For this reason, the clown took control of comedy in narratives and literature as a way to phase-out the mythological and non-human characteristics of the trickster. Of course, the trickster figure still exists, but usually in forms such as science fiction in which the conventions of reality are suspended.

The Importance of Laughter

Laughter is the essence of the clown archetype. “He concentrates upon evoking explosive pleasure in his audience which expresses itself in laughter” (Charles 33). The clown’s comic relief is justification for his inclusion in the plot, and is also his gateway into society. Without comedy, the clown would merely be an outsider, and one who would not be invited into the hub of the narrative. But, clown’s use of laughter exceeds purposes of social inclusion. Laughter, as studied by Freud, has a healing power with the audience that relaxes and bridges gaps between the included and the alienated. Similarly, laughter increases the receptiveness of the audience because laughter breaks down the barriers of exclusion and serves as a foundation for the clown’s secondary functions as a speaker of truth and radical ideas.

Freud asserts that humor has an immense effect on the human subconscious. Overall, Freud observes that there are two ways in which the subconscious interacts with humor. The ego dismisses the message and allows the mind to feel pleasant and happy. However, the superego is

responsible for presenting the ego with a perception of invincibility while absorbing the message and meaning of the joke.

Humor, as described by Freud, is the triumph of the narcissism and the ego's impression of invulnerability (Freud 162). In other words, when in a humorous state of mind, the ego is convinced that it exists above the problems of the world and the problems of self. When the mind finds humor in something, it makes light of the issue and dismisses its relevance; the ego finds it humorous because the message seems unrelated to the mind's self image. In a sense, jokes are considered funny when audiences and readers feel that they do not need to worry about the problems or imperfections that are exposed by comedy.

This feeling of triumph, however, is created by the superego, the parental side of Freud's subconscious triumvirate. It is the primary function of the superego to shield the ego from harm and suffering. In accordance with this role, when the mind is exposed to humor, the superego recognizes its meaning and relevance to self, but convinces the ego that there is no need for worry. "We obtain a dynamic explanation of the humorous attitude, therefore, if we assume that it consists in the humorist's having withdrawn the psychological accent from his ego and having transposed it on to his superego" (Freud 164). Freud explains that the mental processing of humor is controlled by two elements of the subconscious; the impression of the ego and the impression of the superego. The image of self is controlled by the ego and must therefore be protected from external harm, such as the exposure of a weakness or psychological imperfection. Thus, although the ego recognizes humor, it does impact the mind's self image because the superego translates the meaning of the joke and quells the danger of the ego reacting negatively (Freud 164). "It is true that, in bringing about the humorous attitude, the superego is actually repudiating reality and serving an illusion," but, in concert with its parental function, the

superego uses humor to console the ego and protect it from suffering. (Freud 166). As a result, humor impacts the mind by delivering it from suffering; however, jokes also register with the subconscious by exposing concealed imperfections.

From a physiological standpoint, laughter is essential to human life in order to relax the body and produce a feeling of pleasantness. Bala elaborates that laughter decreases stress by lowering the body's cortisol level, and also relaxes the individual by releasing endorphins. "From a neuroscience perspective, we learn that humor and laughter promote a healthier body as well as enriched emotional functioning (Bala 55). Humor fulfills a need for the mind to loosen its grip on reality and view the self in a more positive light. In this way, humor benefits society because it offers relief for the people and an escape from everyday problems. As stated earlier, Freud maintains that humor is reflected on the individual's subconscious and is comprehended on an unconscious level. Therefore, humor highlights the imperfections of humanity and the individual, but is not so harsh that it would inhibit the ego from maintaining its positive self image. Bala then describes the clown's function as a social critic through humor. "The clown, by evoking laughter, can serve as a bridge uniting neglected, enshadowed, and unconscious elements with prevailing conscious attitudes" (Bala 53). Because the clown is the supplier of laughter, he has clear benefit to society, which explains why the clown is a welcome member of society as opposed to the Trickster. Through comedy, the clown is able to distract the audience from the stresses of their lives and offer a momentary release from reality.

The Clown's Function as a Speaker

Using laughter as a tool, the clown can impart his point of view to an audience who is in an agreeable mood. The relaxation that stems from laughter softens the individual's subconscious need to belong and fit in with societal structure. When the clown incites laughter in

the audience, he creates a moment in which the ridiculous can prevail over the norm. As stated earlier, the clown is a fringe character and an outsider in society. However, during a comedic performance, he is invited to temporarily bring his alternative world into society, and likewise, the members of society join him in suspended reality. The clown, like the trickster, acts as a societal intermediary who can bridge the fringe and the hub and temporarily release the standards that govern the respective realms. When the audience laughs, their values are universal and absent of conventions. This is the primary vehicle of the clown's influence as a speaker. Because he is able to capture the attention of the audience and suspend their beliefs, he can momentarily speak his mind and do so without the danger associated with the trickster.

This captivating influence is the foundation of the clown's truth-speaking nature. When the clown has a venue and an audience, he is able to exercise his keen sense of human nature and offer advice and criticism of the current state of society. First, the clown can recognize the insecurities and imperfections of the self-conscious. In other words, the clown understands humanity and the nature of man, more than man himself. As Freud states, the superego hides these imperfections until they are brought to light by an outside source. The clown's parody highlights these imperfections and causes the individual to recognize them without shame. Whereas the individual's self-conscious would lie to itself by hiding these imperfections, the clown evokes the truth by creating an environment that allows not only recognition, but acceptance.

In a similar manner, the clown is able to speak the truth about the state of society in times when society refuses to recognize its own flaws. "[The clown] cleverly comments upon the distance between the acultural element and the prevailing, conscious custom; thus creating a bridge from the one to the other through his awareness of incongruity" (Charles 33).

Characteristically, the clown overdramatizes the state of man, but the overblown nature of performance draws attention to the clown's social commentary and reveals unconscious truths. Charles describes how the clown's adept perception of the self-conscious of mankind, coupled with extravagant representations of societal incongruities, the clown is the quintessential social critic. "The clown performs an extraordinarily alive and immediate ritual of induction into the consciousness of his audience, of relatively neglected elements in the life of individuals in the community" (Charles 33).

The clown's motivation for honesty is a reflection of his location in the narrative. Because the clown exists on the fringe, he cherishes the ability to breach the boundaries of society and enter the hub. Once inside, the clown is a welcomed figure and is appreciated not only for his comic relief, but for his insightfulness. The clown departs from the Trickster in this manner because misrepresentation is absent from his motive; he does not attempt to fool or mislead the public for the benefit of disorder. The clown's honesty grants him passage between society and its fringe and allows for his inclusion in the narrative as a heroic aid. This is what separates the clown from consideration as a villain, and also establishes credibility in his performances because, to some degree, he is trusted by the public.

Despite his truthful nature, the clown still resembles the Trickster as an enemy of boundaries. Ostensibly, the clown breaks down barriers merely because he is an intermediary between society and its fringe, but he also destroys boundaries of thought and societal values. The clown is radical and is allowed to breach the barriers of the socially taboo. Charles writes, "the clown's function is different [from the actor] because he so fully retains his own personality at the same time that he acts out the outrageous, neglected, tabooed, proscribed element" (Charles 33). As a result of the clown's honesty, he is compelled to speak his mind, despite

social conventions regarding his message. In the clown's performance, nothing is off limits, a characteristic that is both tragic and beneficial for the clown.

The tragedy of the clown is his unyielding difference from convention. He accepts his role as fool who cannot live within the confines of society and laws, but consequently, must banish himself to the margins of humanity where his actions and thoughts are permitted. "He offers himself for the hostility of the audience as his art becomes greater when he gives up his dignity" (Bala 59). It is the function of the clown to display the ridiculous and challenge the norms, even at the price of exclusion.

The clown benefits from his marginality, however, because he is not bound by the same expectations of society. This allows him to not only explore the socially taboo, but he can do so without the judgment of the public. The clown has already relegated himself to the fringe, so there is no punishment that can reach him by the standards of society. In so doing, the clown eliminates the need for society to take action against him, when he can be ignored instead. Because of this, the clown can be radical and still dismissed purely as entertainment. This is a benefit to the clown, because it affords him the ability to disseminate the taboo throughout society, while seemingly being ignored. For example, if the clown preaches a radical idea such as sexual liberation, the idea will fall on the deaf ears in practice. But in reality, the idea will be lay dormant in the minds of the people. This spirit of disorder and boundary breaking is a necessary component of the clown because it allows the society to be exposed to alternative ideas.

The narrative history of the trickster and clown are most applicable in the discussion of the contemporary nerd. The nerd's role as an outsider informs his social commentary and trustworthiness in advertising, but also speaks to the comedic nature of his character. Thus, the nerd's place in the narrative structure is most aptly described as an extension and modern

repurposing of the trickster and clown archetypes. The nerd's status as a contemporary archetype will be useful in the forthcoming discussion of the nerd's reproduction in film and advertising, as well as his relationship to traditional hero characters.

Chapter 3: The Popularizing of the Nerd

The nerd character was created in television and cinema as a modernized reinvention of the clown archetype. As such, the nerd exhibited traditional characteristics of the clown, but with an emphasis on outsidership and comedy. This maintained the established order of Campbell's monomyth by keeping the hero in the spotlight and the clown on the fringe. However, mediated representations of the nerd in contemporary American society reflect a dyadic relationship between the normative and the other. This relationship is expressed by using the nerd in opposition to the hero; who represents the appearance and values of the dominant culture. Therefore, the nerd is ascribed the qualities and characteristics of cultural others based on race, religious faith and ethnicity. Despite the implicit politics of the nerd in opposition to the Campbellian hero, the character has grown to popularity through psychological benefits to the audience, a technologically driven economy, and shifting modes of production in Hollywood. In this popularized role, the nerd has continued to perform the function of the clown, yet in a repurposed capacity as the hero.

The Nerd/Hero Dyad

The nerd's role as an outsider is one of the defining traits of the character, but when outsidership is translated into film, subliminal politics of exclusion are exposed. Although this is not absolute, many of the most memorable nerds in television and film are either black or Jewish. When analyzed, it is easy to see why such classifications existed because African Americans and Jews were cultural outsiders in the United States. Their skin color and odd body types marked them as different from the norm. The nerd effectively reproduced the clown archetype because the inherent outsidership of the actors was evident to the audience.

As a result of the nerd's explicit or implied cultural background, one can recognize the dyadic relationship between the nerd and the Campbellian hero. This relationship is a reflection of the dominant ethnic and cultural groups of America, specifically white gentiles. It is instructive to label the Campbellian hero as the champion of the dominant race, and the nerd as the minority. The dyad exists for the appeasement of the general viewing public and illustrates a hegemonic discourse of power based on race. Because white gentiles have been the dominant race in America, traditional heroes look and reflect their cultural conventions. Similarly, the white gentile audience expects that the outsider or villain will be drastically dissimilar from themselves in order to reinforce the goodness of and familiarity of the hero. For this purpose, traditionally marginalized races in American culture are used as outsiders in film and television, further perpetuating their difference from the norm.

To expand the analysis of the dyadic relationship between the nerd and the Campbellian hero, a definition of the hero is required. Campbell explains the hero in the context of his or her value to the culture in which the story is told. Although Campbell mentions that the hero possesses great physical gifts, his basic definition of a hero does not include a physical description. The representations of heroes in classic mythology were created by the storytellers of warrior cultures and often associated the hero with a physically capable icon. Campbell writes, "A hero ventures forth from the world of the common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man (30)."

Campbell's definition describes the hero based on what he does, but does not provide an explanation or standard of what the hero must look like. However, it is evident that in order to fulfill the duties Campbell describes, the hero is culturally defined as one who represents "the best" of the culture. Naturally, in order to epitomize cultural excellence, the hero must also look

like a member of society and perform in accordance to their values. Consequently, the hero of modern American media is a white gentile because he or she mirrors the appearance and virtues of the masses. In popular American film genres such as the Western, the hero is embodied by actors like John Wayne; tall, rugged, and lean. Heroes in the American West are constantly untidy, displaying their lack of concern with glamour and willingness to work hard and get their hands dirty. This do-it-yourself attitude is the foundation of the rugged individualism that defines the Frontier myth and is reflected in western films (Hirschman 11).

The other end of the spectrum in the dyadic relationship with the Campbellian hero is the outsider or nerd. Because the hero is a reflection of the dominant race or culture, the nerd is an outsider. Otherness must be clearly identifiable in the character's appearance, and one of the ways otherness can be represented is visually through film. Thus, in order to convey otherness to the white gentile audience, the nerd as an outsider is commonly represented as a Jew or African American. This representation works within the hegemonic realm of white culture because these groups are marginalized in American society because of their appearance and their faith. This marginalization is notorious in American and world history.

The root of marginalizing African Americans and Jews is the notion that both races are a different species. For African Americans, this notion is a remnant from slavery. Slaves were treated as sub-human and barred from socializing with and residing in the proximity of white people. Even following the abolition of slavery, segregation laws kept African Americans outside of white society. Aside from living on the fringe of white society, African Americans were considered outsiders with respect to reproduction. Mixing of races, or miscegenation, was a primary concern for the white population who felt that their pure bloodlines were threatened by interaction with black people. However, miscegenation was not only a concern for the protection

of purity; it was a protection of power. Miscegenation would disintegrate the dominance of white power and no longer allow for the superiority of one people based on race. As a result, segregation continued and forced African Americans to the margins of society, thus creating a history of outsidership in American culture.

Similarly, Jews have been marginalized because of their difference from Aryan, gentile populations. Jewishness is problematic because of defining physical characteristics, as well as differing views of religion. Like African Americans, these differences were considered threatening when mixed with the normative, white population. For example, the Jewish practice of circumcision was highly detested and viewed as “annihilation” of the male reproductive organ (Gilman 198). During Hitler’s Third Reich, the Nazis viewed Jewish men as a threat to the natural order within the Aryan race. Jews were often castrated in order to prevent miscegenation (Victor 140). This is similar to the symbolic practice of castrating African Americans during lynchings. However, where mixing of white and black races would jeopardize power structures and destroy the purity of white women, miscegenation of Jews and Aryans was viewed as spreading a disease. This idea is most notably reflected Adolf Hitler’s conquest to eliminate the Jewish race and cleanse the world of the Jewish disease (Gilman 210). As a result, Jewishness is synonymous with outsidership in American culture. The idea that Jews and African Americans are different species from white gentiles makes them the perfect outsiders in narratives. The dyadic relationship between the Campbellian hero and the nerd places the dominant white gentile as the hero and champion of normative life, while the nerd represents the otherness of the African American and Jewish communities.

How the Nerd Climbed the Social Ladder

Despite historical prejudices, the nerd became an accepted and popular character in modern film; both as a traditional comedic outlet and as a protagonist. Beginning in the 1970s with films by Woody Allen and continuing through the 1980s with Spike Lee, representations of Jewishness and blackness became more prominent in mainstream media. Suddenly the nerd was transformed from an outsider to a welcomed presence within the narrative. This popularizing is significant considering the fact that the predominant American audience was still comprised of white gentiles. Given the unwavering nature of the demographic power structure, one can assume that the nerd's rise to popularity was not merely a shift in audience characteristics, rather, the acceptance and popularizing of the nerd is the result of three core concepts: psychologically, the nerd allows the audience to feel more comfortable because they are taking part in the ridicule of others; the nerd is associated with the leading technological minds of the late 20th century, thus gaining influence as a result of economic change; and the presence of the nerd reflects the shifts in the modes of producing media.

The nerd functions as a modern and popularized clown figure. The character represents a distinct need to move away from the preexisting images of clowns and jesters with painted faces, but without sacrificing a dedicated character for comedic relief. Thus, the nerd's role does not differ from that of the clown; however, its functions are manifested in a consistent and recognizable body type and personality. The presence of the nerd in contemporary media is perpetuated by reproducing these unwavering character traits and using audience expectation as an enthymeme. That is, when the audience is presented with a body and personality that resembles the nerd, qualities and characteristics of the clown are immediately ascribed to it. For this reason, the nerd carries on the clown's function as a comedian, an outsider and social intermediary, as well as a credible purveyor of truth and cultural criticism.

The nerd's placement as a societal outsider is the key factor in its absorption of the clown function. The invention of the nerd is a reflection of common hierarchies of societal importance. As opposed to other characters, the nerd struggles to fit into the prevailing social structure because of awkwardness or an undesirable physique. Just as the trickster differentiates from the hero in Campbell's monomyth, the nerd lacks the beauty or charisma of the popular protagonist. In light of this difference, the nerd exists away from the realm of the protagonist and performs the role of the social outsider. When the template of Campbell's archetypal characters is applied to modern media, the location of the nerd allows for the seamless recreation of the clown function in a human and unmasked form.

The performance of outsidership is what allows the nerd figure to be recreated in numerous cultural contexts. As an outsider, the nerd can be presented in many forms depending on the conventions of society. The nerd is not limited by race, gender, or faith because it is difference that begets outsidership. Therefore, although the physicality of the nerd is characteristically static, the appearance of the nerd can change to accommodate difference in race, gender, and faith. For example, Woody Allen and Larry David meet the categorical standards of the nerd because of their unassuming physicality and humor, but they are considered societal outsiders primarily because of their faith in Judaism. A similar looking black man, such as Spike Lee's Mars Blackmon in *She's Gotta Have It* can also exist as a nerd because of the unchanging body type. Race, gender, and faith provide difference that makes the nerd an outsider or departure from societal norms. Outsidership is a key component of nerd identity, but it does not exclude white gentiles from nerdiness, evidenced by Justin Long—a white, catholic actor. The classification of the nerd originates from an opposing image of the Campbellian hero in the monomyth. Those who are not fit for war are possible candidates for this character designation.

The Psychology of Otherness

The popularizing of the nerd begins with the psychological benefits of the character. Specifically, Freudian thought claims that the egos of audience members are best served by recognizing flaws in others and using those flaws to reflect on the self. When the ego processes these flaws, it receives satisfaction in the knowledge that the self is superior to the character it is viewing. According to Freud, this is the foundation of comedy (162). Therefore, in order to pander to the egos of the audience and generate laughter, characters with the most vulnerabilities and weaknesses must be presented.

The nerd's weaknesses serve the egos of the audience because of the character's dyadic relationship with the Campbellian hero. When the ego encounters the nerd, it recognizes the differences between the nerd and the self and happily embraces the superiority that comes with the knowledge that the nerd is imperfect. Therefore, the benefits of the nerd to the ego are twofold: the nerd allows the ego to view difference, and nerd's flaws grant satisfaction to the ego through ridicule. Both of these functions justify the value of the nerd in the narrative and speak to the dyad with the Campbellian hero. As a representation of the masses, the Campbellian hero is the champion of all desirable qualities. The hero is a benchmark for excellence within society and performs as a role model for the public. Although the Campbellian hero stands for goodness, his excellence transitively exposes the character flaws of the audience. The audience is intended to aspire to the level of goodness presented by the Campbellian hero, but these aspirations come with the forced realization that they are imperfect both physically and morally.

However, if the hero is a symbol of perfection that causes the audience to feel self-conscious, there must also be a character that allows the audience to appease their egos. The nerd allows the audience to revel in their current state because of difference. As a representation of

outsiderness, the nerd not only possesses qualities that are inherently different from the masses, but a greater number of flaws than the Campbellian hero. These flaws allow the audience to recognize what is good about themselves and feel a sense of satisfaction that is not attainable through exposure to the Campbellian hero. This recognition of flaws cannot happen with the Campbellian hero because the hero characteristically lacks glaring flaws and ridiculing the Campbellian hero would be analogous to ridiculing the self. Self-deprecation does not serve the ego because the ego's function is to preserve personal notions of identity and maintain personal pride. By ridiculing a representation of the self, it would only be a detriment to the ego and personal identity as a whole. However, because the nerd is dissimilar from the masses, the audience is free to ridicule without negatively impacting their egos.

In Freudian terminology, comedy is the triumph of the ego's invulnerability (162). By laughing at the other, the ego sees a vulnerability that does not exist within the self and feels superior as a result. Therefore, in order to appease the ego and generate personal satisfaction, the ego must ridicule the flaws of others. Thus, the nerd is an essential character in narratives because it can perform as a scapegoat, which allows the audience to feel better about themselves. This benefit to the ego serves in opposition to the Campbellian hero and provides justification for the growing popularity of the nerd. Although audiences strive to reach the goodness of the Campbellian hero, the ego must recognize its own vulnerability by comparison to the perfection of the hero. Conversely, the nerd boosts egos because it allows the audience to value the qualities they possess that the nerd does not. As a result, the nerd's ability to impact the audience on a positive, psychological level is a key component of the nerd's rise to prominence in modern media.

In modern media, the nerd is most often employed as a comedian. In this role, the nerd provides a distraction from the plot, and also enhances the enjoyment of the audience through humor. However, the nerd's humor is specific to highlighting its failed engagement with society. By doing so, the social ineptitude of the nerd conveys a sense of vulnerability and gives the audience something to laugh at. Specific to this failure is the pursuit of intimate relationships. In *Superbad* (2007) two nerds, Evan and Seth, strive to win the hearts of their high school crushes before they graduate. The film is predicated upon the struggle of Evan and Seth to talk to girls and ultimately win their affection. Evan and Seth function comically by showcasing their inability to act like experienced, smooth-talking cool kids and repeatedly making mistakes in courtship.

Woody Allen and Spike Lee also illustrate their romantic deficiencies in *Manhattan* (1979) and *She's Gotta Have It* (1986), respectively. Both nerd characters are able to find erotic love; however, their relationships are perverse and atypical. In *Manhattan* Allen plays the character of Isaac, who begins dating a high school girl after being divorced twice. Isaac settles for his high school lover until he falls for Mary, the mistress of his best friend, played by Michael Murphy. Despite Isaac's ability to find erotic satisfaction, he can only do so with partners that are not right for him. In a similar fashion, Lee's character Mars Blackmon in *She's Gotta Have It* also looks for love in the wrong places by becoming involved with Nola, a confused beauty who tries juggling three erotic relationships at one time. Both examples of Allen and Lee show the incongruous nature of the nerd with respect to societal notions of relationships because they only have atypical relationships and love those who do not fully love them back. Thus, the nerd's inability to find a normative, heterosexual relationship provides humor for the audience.

The nerd also performs as a comedian through his dress and physical appearance. The nerd's attire shows little or no regard for fashion and is humorous for its outlandishness. Typical nerd dress is overly formal and poorly arranged into outfit ensembles. Steve Urkel, the nerdy next-door neighbor in the television sitcom, *Family Matters* (1989-1998) epitomizes the humorous dress of the nerd. Urkel wore braces on his teeth, thick-rimmed and oversized eyeglasses, tight jeans with suspenders, and tacky multi-colored shirts. Urkel's character was created for one episode only, however, due to an overwhelming audience response, Urkel was written-in future episodes and later became the star of the show. Although Urkel's eccentric personality gained him popularity with the audience, it was his physical appearance that was intended for viewers to laugh at.

Nerd dress and appearance is also represented by Carlton Banks, a secondary character in *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990-1996). On the show, Carlton is the cousin and close friend of Will Smith, but lacks Will's strong stature and good looks. Also, despite his best efforts, he cannot fit in and be as cool as Will. Carlton is a product of his Bel-Air upbringing, so his dress is always extremely formal, but can often include obnoxiously bright colors. Although Carlton does not look outlandish around the house, whenever he ventures out with Will or interacts with young people, he is constantly ridiculed by those around him. In addition, when Carlton appears on the screen wearing a new outfit, there is often canned laughter in the background. Carlton's unimpressive body type and straitlaced attire satisfy the physical characteristics of the nerd and make evident his role as a comedic outlet on the show.

A Nerd Economy

Nerd imagery has grown as a result of American economic changes the late 20th Century. Following the Carter administration in the early 1980s, the economic climate of the United States

was the worst since the Great Depression. However, this time period also brought considerable technological growth to the country and the world. Personal computer giants such as Microsoft and Apple were gaining momentum and the faces of their movements were the founders of the respective corporations. In a country whose identity was either the macho, suit-wearing businessman, or the determined, blue-collar hero, the stage was being seized by visionaries like Bill Gates and Steve Jobs; individuals who were unassuming, intelligent, and looked nothing like the symbols of American economy. In light of the economic climate, nerds supplanted Campbellian heroes such as Henry Ford and Theodore Roosevelt as the icons of success and leadership, making evident that in order to survive the struggling economy, heroes rooted in brains are more favorable than those rooted in brawn. In a late, yet fortuitous discovery, I stumbled upon Richard Florida's *The Rise of the Creative Class* in which he discusses a similar inversion of heroism. He writes, "The hero was typically the pilot who flew the space ship, not the engineer who designed it. The engineer was kept in the background because he was a geek. Today we have the engineer as the pop-culture hero" (Florida 207-209). The triumph of Florida's creative, intellectual class over the rugged Campbellian hero helps explain the nerd's rise to prominence in the 1980s.

This transition of values with respect to the hero's qualities was facilitated by the public's adoption of the nerd through humor. In order to promote the nerd as a hero, a specific and semiotic body type needed to be reproduced that would not only inform the audience of the nerd's presence on screen, but also stimulate the recognition of the nerd as a reinvented clown. An important distinction between the nerd and all forms of the clown is body type and appearance. All nerds are clowns, but not all clowns are nerds. Nerds have a specific appearance that is common within the character type. Overall, nerds appear as weak, effeminate, and

sexually ambiguous. This appearance is meant to highlight difference through contrast to the hero. Nerds are often skinny and lacking musculature in order to convey a sense of innocence and harmlessness.

The physical appearance of the nerd is an important to its function as a clown. Specifically, the nerd must lack physical impressiveness in order to serve as an effective comedian. If the nerd was muscular and menacing, the value of the jokes would be lost. This is a reflection of Freudian thought because the subconscious revels in the problems and shortcomings of others. The ego's understanding of humor is the vulnerability in others, but assurance in the self (Freud 162). If the nerd did not appear vulnerable, there would be rejoicing for the audience's egos, and no humor would be found.

This is similar to the necessary redefining of the trickster for comedic purposes. The trickster was deemed as malicious and evil and, as such, could not reach the audience on a subconscious level. The comedian must be accessible to the audience in order to be considered funny, thus, trickster comedy reformed itself by transforming into the human clown. However, the nerd is not afforded the comedic luxury of the clown's mask, so the body must itself be inherently amusing to the audience. Therefore, in the realm of physically fit heroes, it is clear that the nerd's unassuming and vulnerable body type does not belong. But, because of this aesthetic departure from the hero, the difference and helplessness is intended to generate humor in the audience.

Additionally, the nerd must appear as weak in order to make his message more accessible to the public. Part of the clown's function is an intermediary between realms and the messenger of societal truths. In order to effectively convey this message, the nerd requires the attention of the audience, but cannot generate fear or uneasiness. If the nerd's appearance was intimidating, it

could be aligned with a malicious trickster character and either ignored or dismissed as deception. In order for the word of the nerd to be allowed and taken as truth in the realm of the hero, the messenger must be trustworthy and unintimidating.

In the wake of economic crisis of the 1980s, nerds began to proliferate in cinema and television as symbols of fiscal stability. Specifically, a boom of nerd characters hit television in the late 80s and early 90s as the technological revolution picked up speed. Shows such as *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990-1996), *Saved by the Bell* (1989-1993) and *Family Matters* (1989-1998) featured nerds who were revered for their intellectual prowess. Although the macho protagonists enjoyed greater social interactions, the shows were making a statement about the heroes of the future; the popular, Campbellian protagonists enjoy social success, but their value to the future and the economy will be minimal. For example, the juxtaposition of Carlton Banks and Will Smith in *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* displays that the nerd may struggle through social situations, but will eventually overcome the protagonist with brainpower. Will Smith as the hero of the sitcom is popular in numerous social circles and possesses a proclivity for dating beautiful women that would be admired by any viewer. However, Will does not apply himself in school and does not consider his future. As far as the audience can tell, the future for Will's economic independence looks bleak. By contrast, Carlton struggles in social situations but excels in school, as evidenced by his acceptance to Princeton University. Although the audience is intended to love Will, the show implicitly states that he is doomed as a character and the leadership of our country and economy will fall into the hands of capable nerds like Carlton.

Fast-forwarding to contemporary nerd media, it is evident that the nerd has become the hero of the future because of his intelligence and economic potential. This is evidenced by *The Social Network* (2010), in which the protagonist is a nerd who becomes the youngest billionaire

in history. The film chronicles Mark Zuckerberg's life during and after his creation of Facebook but takes place within the context of a lawsuit in which Zuckerberg is being sued for intellectual property theft. The plaintiffs could quintessential Campbellian heroes; They are wealthy twin brothers who are Olympic-caliber crew rowers and come from a family of Harvard graduates. As the film progresses, the audience bears witness to Zuckerberg's intellectual power and the twins inability to halt his progression toward wealth. Zuckerberg overcomes the laws of Harvard, and ultimately the United States in order to vanquish his waspy foes and protect his well-earned profits. As a result, the nerd triumphs over the hero. By the end of the film, the audience is intended to respect Zuckerberg, yet slightly dislike him. Despite his obvious ingenuity, Zuckerberg possesses very few positive qualities as a person and role model. Yet, he is heralded as a hero because of his economic success. This signifies the downfall of the Campbellian hero in the modern economic climate because it has become less important to be socially and morally good, and more important to be financially stable. This is an image we saw in television productions of the nerd conquer such as Carlton's inevitable financial triumph over Will Smith.

Contemporary nerd media has inverted the roles of traditional Campbellian narratives by placing the outsider at the center of the narrative. Although the nerd protagonist does not reflect the image or cultural values of the Campbellian hero, the nerd has gained the spotlight and continues its prominence as a result of the poor economic climate that existed at the advent of the technological revolution. The economic struggles of the time have transformed the nerd into a greater standard of excellence because of his ability to achieve financial success through intelligence. Consequently, the Campbellian hero rooted in physical superiority and moral excellence loses cultural influence.

How Nerds are Produced

The rising popularity of the nerd is a reflection of shifting modes of production in the film and television industries. Nerds are used to by filmmakers who wish to depict otherness at the center of the narrative without upsetting the existing order of the Campbellian hero. In order for the other to take the spotlight from the hero, the other must carry the responsibilities of humor not surprisingly associated with the nerd. Nerd comedies are becoming more common in film and television as an effort to move away from the stereotypical “wasp” American protagonist.

A discussion of the modes of production begins with the politics of Hollywood. The film industry in Hollywood was built by Jewish men, arguably nerds. Jews owned the major studios, were highly influential in legal representation and agency, and dominated the financial sector (Gabler 2). However, at the outset, Hollywood was disinterested in reproducing notions of Jewishness. The first generation of “Hollywood Jews” were the founders of five major studios, Universal Pictures, Paramount Pictures, the Fox Film Corporation, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, and Warner Brothers (3). All five studio owners grew up in poverty in Eastern Europe and used the film industry to move into the upper-classes. In order to accomplish this, they tried to aggressively assimilate into American culture and left their roots as Jewish immigrants behind. “[They were united in] their utter and absolute rejection of their pasts and their equally absolute devotion to their new country. Something drove the young Hollywood Jews to a ferocious, even pathological, embrace of America” (4).

In order to become accepted into American culture, Gabler argues that the Hollywood Jews needed their studios and their films to be massively successful. Because of this, they could not afford to create images that would be unpopular with the masses. As a result of their desire to become Americanized, the Hollywood Jews created a culture that represented their views of

what America was. They believed that by stripping themselves of their cultural and religious heritage, they could feed the masses what they wanted to see and hear. “They would fabricate their empire in the image of America as they would fabricate themselves in the image of prosperous Americans. They would create its values and myths, its traditions and archetypes” (6).

To this end, the Hollywood Jews produced films that pandered to the masses and depicted normalcy as the white gentile. By doing so, they created the standard of Americanized images that are still present in film and television. The standardized form that was produced by the Hollywood Jews is the foundation of the narrative structure in which the dyadic relationship between nerd and Campbellian hero exists. In the pursuit of assimilation, the Hollywood Jews willingly created the Jew as an outsider and relegated his character type to the fringe of society.

Although the studios were content with reproducing Americanness, independent writers and directors were free to make films outside of the fabric of traditional American cinema. As the studios lost power in the late 1950s and 1960s, new directors such as Woody Allen mined the very images that the studio executives sought to banish from the screen. Allen brought forth the Jewish nerd and showed that the image could be quite profitable. Beginning in 1969 with the film *Take the Money and Run*, Allen made films starring himself as the Jewish nerd that proved to be commercially and critically successful. Allen’s career in Hollywood was a success despite his Jewish heritage, but his films were not able to fully upend the standard of Americanized cinema. In order for Allen’s films to reach their prominence, Allen had to embrace the role of the Jew within the hierarchy of American film narratives. The Jew’s history as an outsider and antithesis to the Campbellian hero influenced the character traits Allen brought to his protagonists. Thus, the nerds played by Allen were comedic characters who embodied outsidership in a lead role.

Transforming the nerd into a protagonist has been widely repeated since Allen's films as a way of incorporating otherness into the spotlight of film and television. Both Spike Lee and Larry David as writers and actors have adopted the role of the comedic outsider through the reproduction of the nerd character. The prominence of nerd characters as protagonists and representations of difference illustrate the shift in modes of production because writers and directors are moving away from the standard of Americanness in media by repurposing the comedic function of the nerd.

As a reinvention of the clown and a representation of Jewishness in cinema and television, the nerd performs the essential archetypal functions of the clown. Primarily, the nerd is a tool for comic relief as a distraction from the hero's narrative, or performs as the protagonist in comedies. The nerd is also a social intermediary between the realm of the hero and the fringe. In this capacity, the nerd conveys knowledge of both ways of life, and provides a bridge between worlds. Lastly, the nerd is a social critic and purveyor of truth. As a reflection of the nerd's distance from society, his keen mind can identify the issues in the plot that are not apparent to other characters.

The nerd character commonly performs the role of the intermediary between the society and its fringe. In the context of coming-of-age high school media, the nerd is the interloper between the popular crowd and the social outcasts. The main function of role is the acquisition of license. Because the nerd exists outside the conventions of society and expectations of the elite, it is free to bend the rules and act out against the established order. However, comedic value affords the nerd the luxury of being a mediator between realms. Although its rightful place is on the fringe, the nerd is often allowed into the sphere of the popular for the amusement the group and the audience.

In the HBO series *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000-Present), Larry David is a nerd outsider who uses comedy to supersede his religious difference and enter exclusive communities. However, David is not devout in his Jewish beliefs, so his comedy allows him to be a middle-man. David possesses the ability to vacillate between gentile and Jewish communities, but ultimately returns to the periphery because of his offensive character. In the fifth season, Larry attempts to help his ailing friend Richard Lewis by befriending an Orthodox Jew who runs a kidney transplant consortium. Larry is able to introduce himself as Jew, but quickly discovers that he is not Jewish enough for Orthodox standards. To hide his cavalier religious attitudes, Larry attempts to mimic Yiddish and observe the strict lifestyle of Orthodox Jews. As expected, Larry blows his cover and loses access to the Orthodox community, however, his ability to engage social and cultural communities other than his own was unwavering (2000).

The nerd's function as a social intermediary is also extended to the understanding of cultures from an exterior perspective. Because the nerd is not a fixed member of one social or cultural structure, it uses keen intellect to make accurate and unbiased judgments about the state of society. Although the nerd's recognizes flawed social orders, the primary goal of the nerd's observations in modern media has been to find a way to take advantage of the prevailing social structure, and use that knowledge for sexual gain. The social observations of the nerd expose a system of behavior and a willingness to perpetuate this behavior for intimacy.

This principle is the catalyst for the plot of *Superbad*. While reflecting on the nature of drunk women, Evan and Seth discover that alcohol often leads to accidental sexual encounters. Following this epiphany, the pair makes it their goal to "be that mistake" (2007). Although it is easy to observe that drunkenness leads to indiscretions, Evan and Seth were able to perceive the societal context for these behaviors. They recognized the expectations for high school girls to

drink in excess as a part of their adolescent experience. Although this represents a flawed social structure, Evan and Seth expose the wrongs by capitalizing on the existing social conventions for their personal, sexual gains.

Older nerds, such as Larry David or Woody Allen, also recognize and exploit the flaws of society for sexual gain, but do so through status and money. Woody Allen's character in *Manhattan* seizes sexual opportunities granted to him by virtue of his career and amassed wealth. As a successful television writer and mature individual, Isaac had both physical and fiscal value for young, immature women. Isaac realized that he fulfilled a female desire to be with a wealthy older man and capitalized on his knowledge for personal gain. Thus, despite the predator-like nature of his relationship, Isaac was willing to take advantage of his appeal to high school girls in the pursuit of sex (1979). Similarly, Larry David takes advantage of his notoriety as celebrity in order to receive sexual attention from women. Although Larry recognizes the fact that the interest in him is mostly superficial, he accepts the societal practice in exchange for sex. In the eighth season, Larry repeatedly has sex with a *maître d'* at a restaurant because he frequently gives her tips. He recognizes that a woman of her beauty would never normally be interested in him for reasons other than money, but he plays along and tips her in exchange for sex (2011). Both Allen and David as mature nerds are able to identify the flaws with society, but choose to expose and take advantage of them in manners that are sexually beneficial.

In close relation to the nerd's role as a social intermediary, nerds also serve as messengers of truth. As stated earlier, it is a characteristic of the trickster and clown archetypes to possess extra-sensory perceptions with relation to society. In a similar vein, the nerd's perception of society results in an unclouded knowledge of truth. For this reason, the nerd is an effective speaker because it harbors a profound understanding of the world, as well as the trust of

its audience. As an unthreatening, yet accurate and reliable source, the nerd is the source of insight into the human condition. This notion is epitomized by the character of Mars Blackmon in *She's Gotta Have It*. Although Mars acts like a fool and is Nola's source for comedy, he deceptively perceives the truth about her behavior and shares it with the audience. When asked about her promiscuity, Blackmon assuredly states that she has deep-seated psychological issues that can be traced back to her relationship with her father (1986). Of the men that Nola sleeps with, Mars is least qualified as traditional boyfriend material. However, despite being a loser on the outside, he possesses an understanding of Nola that none of her lovers share.

The truthful nerd theme is also seen in two roles played by Jesse Eisenberg: Columbus in *Zombieland* (2009) and Mark Zuckerberg in *The Social Network* (2010). In *Zombieland*, Columbus is one of four remaining humans in a world overrun with zombies. Although he is not a fully omniscient narrator, he can describe the feelings of other group members because, as a nerd, he possesses superior insight. As the narrator, Columbus serves as the collective conscience for the group and through his understanding of each member of their group, has the ability to accurately speak for the group based on truths that no other group member realizes. In *The Social Network*, Eisenberg plays a similarly insightful character, but with a much rougher exterior. Mark Zuckerberg is the genius computer programmer who invented the social media giant, Facebook. The creation of Facebook itself serves as proof to Zuckerberg's knowledge of the truth because it reflects his analysis of society. He observed that the world was moving into the realm of cyberspace, and thus needed a medium to communicate through, and connect with contacts. Zuckerberg's creation of Facebook unveiled the truth that people needed a way to represent themselves in interactive space and delivered the preeminent social networking website as the solution. Zuckerberg's extra-sensory ability to recognize the need for connectivity on the

internet and the insight to produce the perfect solution verifies that he meets the standards for the nerd who can understand profound truths about the society in which he does not belong.

Chapter 4: What is a Commercial?

Television commercials are the primary medium through which brands communicate with their consumers. On the surface, commercials exist as a way of notifying potential consumers of a product that should be considered for purchase, and to persuade the consumer to buy a particular kind, or brand, of product. Television commercials serve this communicative purpose by creating exposure for the product, but brands value communication with the consumer for reasons beyond generating publicity. Communication is an essential element of commercial advertising because it affords a brand an opportunity to describe itself and convey its values to the target audience. This provides a way for brands to differentiate themselves from their competitors, and by doing so, generate brand loyalty.

Brand loyalty is a consumer's continued affiliation with a particular product because of specific, value-related reasons (Stutts & Barker 221). Therefore, when a consumer is faced with two, seemingly identical products, the purchase will be influenced by the consumer's preexisting relationship with or knowledge of a particular brand. "Image advertising contrasts with traditional 'hard sell' or 'product' advertising, where audiences are given reasons to choose Product X over Product Y. A visual language that invites the consumer into a relationship [with the brand] dominates image communications" (Stutts & Barker 210). When analyzed in concert with the surface-level functions of commercials, it is sensible to conclude that a commercial is a piece of branded communication and its primary objectives are to both create product exposure and establish brand loyalty.

If commercials are intended to inspire brand loyalty, they must include key elements that influence the audience's reaction to the advertisement. The first element is narrative. Although there are different styles of commercials, modern advertising has become less concerned with

merely showcasing products and has replaced that style with inventing a need for a product. In other words, the most effective commercials are not purely descriptive of a product and its function; rather, products are placed within the context of a consumer's life or within the framework of the brand's mission for the consumer.

The second element is the use of persuasive appeals. In order to be the most effective, advertisers must consider the audience their commercials will reach and how to generate the greatest psychological impact in that demographic. In order to do so, the commercial must establish trust and credibility, likeability, and must possess a connection to the viewer's personal identity (Sergio et al. 4). Using these persuasive elements, the commercial is most likely to resonate within the audience.

The third element is "politics of inclusion." The creation of brand loyalty is contingent upon the audience's reception of the commercial's message. Because of this, brands tailor their ads to reach either broad audiences or specific, targeted audiences. However, in order to accomplish this, the brands must first evaluate who their message will alienate and what negative repercussions may result from their selected imagery and the language of their narrative. Most notably, audiences can be alienated based on race, gender, sexuality, and religion. Thus, it is the role of the brand to assess the socio-political ramifications of their commercial. The following chapter will break down the component parts of television commercials and further detail the established structure of narrative, persuasive appeals, and political considerations.

The Narrative Paradigm in Advertising

The challenge among brands is to present the essential information to the customer in a period of 15-60 seconds. Because of time restraints, commercials must produce concise communication that can be interpreted and understood without large amounts of background or

detail. In order to accomplish this, commercials have transformed into short stories, or narratives. The stimulation of brand loyalty relies on the narratives that are created and perpetuated by the brand. The narrative illustrates the values of the brand, characteristics that make the brand unique, and deliver crucial decision making arguments within a time span that rarely eclipses a minute. When audiences identify with values conveyed in the narrative, they are more likely to purchase the product and continue purchasing it. “Businesses rely heavily on their stories, or images that suggest a story, to engender loyalty. Because of the value of loyalty, businesses invest heavily in generating a good story through advertising and public relations” (Stutts & Barker 209). For example, if a cosmetics brand asserts that they do not test their products on animals, they are more likely to sell within animal rights circles than brands who do engage in testing. Theoretically, this consumer will continue to purchase this brand as long as their belief systems remain aligned. Also, brand loyalty can span generations of individuals if the values and exposure to the brand are passed down. As a result of the monetary value of brand loyalty, it is imperative for brands to establish a narrative identity in order to relate to consumers with similar values.

The importance of narrative identities for brands stems from the Narrative Paradigm, which describes a sociological need to tell stories and align personal beliefs with those stories. Postulated by Walter Fisher in 1984, the Narrative Paradigm Theory maintains that humans are natural storytellers, and most of our decision making processes are related to our critical evaluation of narratives that are presented to us (7-8). According to Stutts and Barker, all brand communications can be viewed as stories within the context of the Narrative Paradigm and thus used to rationally and symbolically evaluate the values that inspire the audience (214). The theory also states narratives are assessed based on two distinctions; narrative probability and

narrative fidelity. Narrative probability is an evaluation of the story's cohesion and relationship with reality, and narrative fidelity examines that story's application or relevance to the audience's life (Fisher 8). Therefore, in order to begin to build brand loyalty, a brand must first satisfy the expectations of the Narrative Paradigm and construct a good story, one that is probable. This story must appeal to the values of the audience and inspire them, as well as flow cohesively and possess a relevance to the consumer's life.

According to Fisher, narratives are “symbolic actions—words and/or deeds—that have sequence or meaning for those who live, create or interpret them” (58). From this definition, one can discern that narratives include a specific plot or action that drives the story and produces meaning. In advertising, this principle is exercised in order to satisfy audience perceptions of narrative fidelity and is executed in two ways, the creation of a story about an individual, or the reinvention of an existing narrative.

Creating a story about an individual's relationship with the product is the fundamental delivery of the brand promise. This allows the viewer to be placed inside the narrative of the commercial and visualize a relationship with the particular product. This plot style seeks to illustrate the benefits of the product in a real, yet often romanticized setting. For example, commercials for cleaning products commonly take place in a large, expensive kitchen that most consumers do not have. However, the underlying narrative implies that everybody cleans, regardless of the size and quality of the kitchen, so this product will serve any consumer because it can clean even the finest kitchens. Although the specifics of narrative, such as setting, do not need to match the viewer's reality, the actions, in this case cleaning, are congruent. “What makes image advertising interesting for assessment is that it is often a rich, romanticized, complex series of visuals that may bear a distant resemblance to what the business or its products will

actually do for the customer” (Stutts & Barker 220). Using the product will not make the consumer’s kitchen transform into a beautiful and expensive kitchen, but the commercial delivers the promise that the product is suitable for cleaning any kitchen. Thus, despite the plot’s exaggeration of reality, the consumer’s ability to see his or herself in the narrative produces positive emotional feedback and achieves narrative fidelity.

Reinventing an existing narrative does not feature the consumer at center, but uses the consumer’s knowledge of popular culture in order to drive greater understanding and relevance (Stutts & Barker 211). Reinvented narratives remind the consumers of a story they have already heard so that the commercial does not need to explicitly explain the plot. For example, if the audience sees a rugged white man with whip and signature cowboy hat running through the jungle, they will be reminded of Indiana Jones, the star of a global hit film series. From this well-known narrative, the audience can infer that Indiana is on an expedition to recover a priceless artifact and must make a cunning escape. At this point, a brand such as the leading global cell phone provider can come to Indiana’s aid and allow him to call for help. Although no cell phone customer will be reliving the fictive life of Indiana Jones, the audience can relate to the need have excellent cell phone reception in a time of desperation. Without the existence of the Indiana Jones narrative, it would be the duty of the commercial to explain why the character is in extreme need of cell phone service. Conversely, by capitalizing on the prevalence and awareness of the narrative, the commercial allows the audience to assume that danger is following Indiana. The consumer can recognize that reinvented narratives are not actually true; however, these narratives still satisfy expectations of narrative fidelity because they represent a meaningful story in the consumer’s life. Preexisting narratives, while fictive, are intended to resemble real life given a slight suspension of disbelief. Therefore, the consumer can still recognize the fictive

narrative as truth because of its close relationship to reality. Both consumer-centric and reinvented narratives speak to the audience because there is a level of familiarity with the plot, so both techniques are relevant to the lives of consumers.

The narrative of a commercial is also highly reliant on its characters. Naturally, the type of character that is used must be consistent with the narrative type that is being employed, but the character is a crucial part of the effectiveness of a commercial. If the audience does not like the character, they will miss the message of the narrative and dismiss the product. As a result, the selection of characters in commercials must be done carefully.

Consumer-centric narratives can use unknown actors, but must exert considerable effort in order to be considered a credible and authoritative source. In other words, because the audience is unfamiliar with the actor, the commercial must define who the character is and what he or she believes. This is a tedious task and consumes air time that could be used to further the narrative. As a way of counteracting the barriers of unfamiliarity, many commercials utilize stereotypes in order to inform the audience of the character traits of the protagonist. This allows the audience to personally identify with the stereotype being displayed, or relate to it based on personal relationships. Despite the risks of using stereotypes, using stock characters allows commercials to establish implied character traits and remain faithful to standards of narrative fidelity.

By contrast, many commercials utilize celebrities or famous actors as protagonists. This technique allows the audience to assume particular character traits based on characters the celebrity has played, or based on their public persona. “Consumers tend to perceive the celebrity as projecting source characteristics that are then used in the evaluation of an advertisement and the produce being promoted” (Hunt 1). These source characteristics include likeability,

familiarity and the celebrity's likeness to the consumer. Additionally, celebrities improve the commercial's credibility by conveying trust, expertise and attractiveness. This technique has become popular for many reasons, but all derive from a celebrity's role in a reinvented narrative structure. In light of the audience's prior exposure to the celebrity's personality and values, the viewer goes into the commercial with a partial understanding of the message purely because of the celebrity's relationship to the product. As a result, the viewer's preconceived notions allow the commercial to convey implicit character traits without stereotyping.

For example, it is much easier to depict male charm by displaying an image of the latest James Bond actor, rather than using an unknown actor who must first convince the audience that he is an authority on wooing women. James Bond is notorious for his suave interactions with women, so when the audience sees him, they already possess the knowledge of his character based on his accompanying narrative. Also, as described by Hunt, celebrity familiarity is critical to the reaction of the viewer and the consequential evaluation of the commercial (1). Viewers know what to expect from celebrities, so their prior knowledge increases the credibility of the commercial. In other words, when Sarah McLachlan, a hit vocalist and known philanthropist, appears in a commercial, the audience can immediately expect an appeal to donate to a charitable organization. Given McLachlan's donation history, she serves as a credible spokesperson because she understands what it means to donate and the audience can trust her endorsement because she sincerely believes the message she is conveying. Also, celebrity familiarity capitalizes on popularity. If a celebrity is well known and popular, the message of the narrative is more likely to resonate within the audience. Thus, the selection of commercial protagonists is influential on the overall reception of the narrative and message because the spokesperson's familiarity as a reinvented narrative can dictate the viewer's engagement with the advertisement.

Persuasive Appeals in the Narrative

The message commercial is most effective when embedded with persuasive appeals. Although the goal of the commercial lies within the narrative, it is the responsibility of the spokesperson to generate positive audience reception. Specifically, the spokesperson must establish trust and credibility, create likeability, and impact the consumer's personal, psychological identity. When used together, the spokesperson has the best chance of receiving approval from the audience, which leads to the acceptance of the narrative message and the creation of brand loyalty.

Trustworthiness and credibility are the primary qualities a spokesperson must imbue in order to produce an effective commercial. Trustworthiness is imperative when communicating brand values and product information because it determines whether the viewer will consider the message to be truthful or misleading. According to Hunt, viewers are naturally inclined to lack a comfort level with testimonials from non-family members (2). Therefore, in order to generate a positive response to a spokesperson, the character must assuage the consumer's anxieties and instill confidence. This can be accomplished through actions or deeds that the audience can perceive as good, or the narrative can feature a spokesperson with built-in credibility.

As stated earlier, this function is often performed by celebrities who are easily identifiable by the public and convey brand messages that are in alignment with their personal beliefs. "Celebrities embody a collection of culturally relevant images, symbols, and values" (Choi et al. 86). Therefore, the communication of brand values is more effective when delivered by a celebrity because the celebrity's views are a magnified representation of cultural values. Spokesperson credibility is often found when citing authority figures or professionals such as

doctors. By using such characters to establish trust and credibility, the brand message appears to be rooted in truth and comforts the consumer as a result.

The second form of persuasive appeals is the likeability of the spokesperson or protagonist. “Ad liking is an overall reaction to the commercial, which reflects attitudes and emotions mediating the message effects” (Sergio et al. 4). For obvious reasons, the likeability of an ad determines the success of the campaign and often directly correlates to sales. According to Sergio et al., when the positive feedback of a commercial grows, audiences become more engaged with the brand. “Among other, as commercial liking increases, consumers get better exposures, give more mental processing, engender trust, and transfer affect to the advertised brand” (4). Specifically, ad likeability drives consumer interaction because of the probability of recall. When a consumer views a commercial and experiences a positive feeling, the memory of that product will be more prevalent than an ad that did not deliver the same feeling (Sergio et al. 16). Returning to the challenge of differentiation, a brand can separate itself by producing a likeable and memorable commercial. Although the value of the narrative is multifaceted, likeability is a major contributor to memory association.

Given the importance of ad likeability, the commercial must feature a likeable spokesperson. There are numerous cases in which an unknown actor has won the hearts and wallets the audience; however, most brands turn to celebrity appeal in order to establish instant likeability. By taking advantage of a celebrity’s preexisting popularity, the brand can anticipate a certain amount of likeability just by virtue of the celebrity’s reputation. If the proper celebrity is selected and accurately matched with the identity of the product, the brand can experience great benefits. Khatri claims that the likeability of a celebrity in ad campaigns can result in six main rewards: increased brand awareness and message recall; emotional connections with fans; quick

connections with new costumers; established means of brand differentiation; object of imitation which results in greater product usage; and the creation of a better brand image (35-36).

Regardless of the successes of non-celebrity spokespeople, the prevalence of celebrity protagonists illustrates the importance of commercial and spokesperson likeability because brands are willing to sacrifice substantial amounts of money in order to generate the greatest amount of positive feedback.

The final persuasive appeal inherent to television commercials is the relationship between the spokesperson and the viewer and the psychological impact the character places on personal identity. There are two aspects of the cognitive theory that are at play in advertising; thought recognition and belief verification. These cognitive theories describe the viewer's psychological relationship with the spokesperson with respect to identity and needs, and greatly influence reception of the brand communication (Huang & Hutchinson 99).

The first cognitive theory at play in advertising is thought recognition. Thought recognition examines how an individual interprets a message when asked in a question form. In case studies, the individual is given an ad, and then asked a question regarding the implied brand message, to which the individual must respond yes or no, and then assess how confident they are in their own answer (Huang & Hutchinson 99). Depending on the individual's response, analysts can gauge the effectiveness of the implied message. Although this is a technique which is used to study consumer interpretation, the same processes take place within the minds of the audience when viewing a commercial. However, the assessment of the message is put into the context of the individual.

As an example, the current Old Spice campaign boasts an overly masculine persona who implicitly states that only real men wear Old Spice; an idea that is summed up by the slogan,

“Smell like a man, man.” When a man views this ad, he poses a question to himself, “Am I man enough to wear Old Spice?” Naturally, Old Spice intends for the viewer to respond, “yes,” and have a high enough confidence level that would lead to a purchase. Conversely, if an individual answered yes, but did not feel confident in his answer, the commercial will most likely fail to drive a sale. Thought recognition is a key component of the psychology of consumerism because it requires an evaluation of personal identity. As a result, in order for commercials to be the most effective and translate into sales, the brand must ensure that the consumer will ask the right question and arrive at the desired answer with confidence.

The counterpart to thought recognition is belief verification. In a similar manner to thought recognition, an individual is presented with an ad and must affirm a statement about the brand message with an “agree” or “disagree” response. The difference is that belief verification does not pose a question, rather, presents an assertive statement (Huang & Hutchinson 99). Also, the two theories differ based on the fact that thought recognition sparks an internal conversation about identity, while belief verification assumes a solidified identity and merely asks the individual to confirm or deny the message’s relevance to his or her beliefs. Using the same Old Spice example, belief verification would confront the individual with a statement such as “I am man enough to wear Old Spice.” Whether the individual agrees or disagrees will highlight a fundamental belief about identity. For this reason, belief verification is the preferred model for analyzing a commercial’s impact on the consumer. As opposed to thought recognition, statements of belief verification are more concrete and free from “contamination” because there is no implicitly correct response according to Huang and Hutchinson (99). Therefore, it is the duty of the brand to tailor the content of the commercial in order to dictate which cognitive response the narrative will provoke. Although belief verification provides the most concrete

feedback, but the more passive approach inherent to though recognition could also easily translate into positive viewer feedback and stimulate sales.

Politics of Inclusion

In order to generate brand loyalty, companies must customize the message of their commercial to fit the audience they are appealing to. There are two types of audiences that are taken into account when crafting a commercial; broad or generic audience, and targeted audiences (Grier and Brumbaugh 79). As their names suggest, broad commercials are intended to appeal to all demographics, while targeted ads try to hone-in on a small piece of the market but with a higher purchase probability. Broad ads market products that are intended for universal consumption. Targeted ads are customized to reach a group of people who share something in common, such as race, religion, hobbies, and financial status. It is the nature of targeted ads to exclude certain people because only a specific piece of the market is being highlighted. As a result, many demographics are intentionally alienated. “The practical reality of managing multiple target markets creates strategic difficulties for marketers trying to attract different [market] segments simultaneously” (Grier and Brumbaugh). On the other hand, it is the goal of non-targeted commercials to alienate the fewest amounts of people possible in order to facilitate mass consumption of the product. However, both broad and targeted ads share in common the types of characters that are represented in their narratives, and the types of characters who are excluded. In the end, commercials seek to appease the largest demographic possible by representing its imagery. This is a political maneuver because it ensures that the brand will have the business of the dominant market. By marketing to minority demographics, the brand would run the risk of angering the majority and losing business.

Overall, the United States is dominated by a white, Christian, heterosexual class of consumers. Because of the large influence of this demographic, most commercials use white protagonists or spokespeople. This pattern illuminates a discourse of exclusion because the narrative leaves out other demographics. Thus, broad commercials, which are intended to only alienate a small fraction of the viewing audience, end up creating a narrative world that only includes white Christian heterosexuals. Although Christianity is rarely explicitly stated, there are few, if any, commercials that feature alternative religions at the center of the narrative. Similarly, the narrative world is dominated by the reproduction of heterosexual imagery. Many theorists maintain that this exclusion was done so intentionally in order to avoid associating with controversial social issues. “One might wonder whether it would be a wise decision for a company to specifically target [a] group of consumers through the use of homosexual imagery in advertisements [when] aligning one’s company with this minority group might alienate some of the other 92% of the population” (Hooten et al 1232). Hooten et al continue this discussion by describing how evaluations of homosexual imagery reflects their personal opinion of homosexuality (1233). Martin and Gnoth support this danger by describing male interactions with homosexual or feminine imagery. “Heterosexual men seek to avoid misclassification as a homosexual. We expect masculine men and androgynous men to endorse the masculine norm to avoid misclassification as feminine” (Martin and Gnoth 364). Therefore, in order to affirm their identity, heterosexual audience members will refuse to identify with a spokesperson who appears gay.

Change (2007), more commonly known on YouTube as “Levi’s Gay Commercial” attempted to cross the barriers of target marketing by appealing to the gay community. In the commercial, the audience watches a young man slowly putting on his jeans. Every time he

begins to pull up his jeans, the street below his apartment comes crashing through his floor. The first time he does this, a telephone booth occupied by a presumably gay man is thrust into his living room. The telephone booth voyeur grins and stares at the protagonist, who has yet to fully pull up his pants. When the protagonist eventually pulls up his pants, the apartment disappears and becomes the street, where he is reunited with the voyeur. As the commercial concludes, they walk off together, almost touching hands.

Change was an experiment in the tolerance of gay-targeted ads, but did not succeed in its goal to broadcast this narrative in heterosexual ad space. Due to widespread opposition to the ad's blatant endorsement of the gay community, the commercial only appeared on Logo, a gay television network owned by MTV (Hampp 1). On mainstream networks, *Change* aired, but the masses saw a much different narrative. The plot still resolved around the protagonist pulling up his pants and the street below, but the occupant of the telephone booth became a woman instead of a man. The edited version reproduced expectations of heteronormativity, translating into risk-free marketability to the masses. The case study of *Change* illustrates a reluctance to perpetuate images of homosexuality in advertising because they can alienate audiences and align brands values with controversial and potentially damaging social issues. Thus, censorship becomes a large factor in the construction of an advertisement in order appease the masses and protect brand values.

Chapter 5: Semiotics

Advertising cannot exist in a vacuum; all brand communication must be culturally relevant to the audience it intends to reach. When broken down to component parts, advertising media contains a combination of imagery and writing. As such, the images and language used must be symbolic in order to achieve cultural relevance (Scott 253). The definition of “symbolic” in this case is anything that carries a meaningful interpretation. These symbolic coding systems can be unpacked and analyzed through semiotics. Although the semantics of semiotic studies have been debated and interpreted differently by many scholars, Barthes maintains that “[semiotics] is a science of forms, since it studies significations [or signs] apart from their context (16). The concept of the sign can be boiled down to an instrument of communication, whether it takes the form of a word, image, object, or sound. “The sign is implicitly regarded as a communicative device taking place between two human beings intentionally aiming to communicate or express something” (Eco 14). The study of Semiotics is rooted in the structure of language and how words can convey contextual meaning. From this early distinction, the study has evolved into how objects and symbols can come to represent more than themselves (Gottdiener 8).

In the following chapter, I will discuss the discipline of semiotics through the perspectives of the scholars who contemplated it. Formal elements of semiotics were first defined by Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure spoke from a structuralist perspective and sought a way to classify and identify meaningful language. This resulted in the two characteristics of the sign that Saussure called the “signified” and the “signifier” (Saussure 67). Semiotics developed into mythical language by Barthes. Barthes maintains the structure established by Saussure, but insists that semiotic language reflects and hints at a larger mythical framework that is applied to

ordinary life. In other words, signs and language become meaningful when they are situated within the context of a widely known myth. Barthes also postulates that the use of mythic language and images can be employed to take advantage of capitalist societies by depicting bourgeois values and lifestyles that influence buying practices of the masses based on fantasy. For this reason, the analysis of capitalist advertising by Barthes is especially important to this chapter because his work is not only influential in the discipline, but has also been directly applied to advertising criticism.

Finally, semiotics can be analyzed from the perspective of the impact that it has on advertising and visual rhetoric. Visual rhetoric is predicated upon the idea that argument is bolstered by sign imagery which meets audience expectations and delivers the message a persuasive message that the audience wanted to hear.

Saussure and the Sign

Ferdinand de Saussure pioneered the notion of semiotics in an attempt to better understand the relationship between “idea” and “sound” (Saussure 7). According to Saussure, idea and sound constitute the fundamental aspects of language; “idea” being mental stimulation for communication, and “sound” being the physical expression of the idea. Saussure believed that ideas and sounds existed on parallel courses but needed a bridge to unite them. Therefore, in order to enhance his knowledge of language and its function in human interaction, he needed to determine what bridged the gap between idea and sound (8). The result of this thought was the idea of the “sign.” The sign is arbitrary – a word or object – but its meaning is born from the combination of idea and sound. To Saussure, this was the foundation of language on a cultural level. “The arbitrary nature of the sign explains in turn why the social fact alone can create a linguistic system. The community is necessary if values that owe their existence solely to usage

and general acceptance are to be set up; by himself the individual is incapable of fixing a single value” (8). In other words, signs are capable of ascribing both an idea and a corresponding linguistic expression to an otherwise indefinable thing. For example, the word “cat” has a distinct pronunciation within the English language, but it means nothing without the concept of a four-legged feline. Similarly, a picture of a cat represents the idea or concept of the feline yet simultaneously stimulates the urge to label such a creature with the spoken word “cat”. Ultimately, the cat itself, the word, and the picture are all signs because they both marry the sound with idea.

Saussure’s work with semiotics produced formal characteristics of the sign that aim to replace terms such as “idea” and “sound” with more applicable vocabulary. Based on the idea that the work performed by a sign is “signifying,” Saussure coined the “signified” and the “signifier.” “I propose to retain the words sign...to designate the whole and to replace *concept* and *sound-image* respectively by *signified*...and signifier” (Saussure 67). The signified replaces the notion of the “idea;” defining it as the concept and meaning that is associated with a particular sign. The signifier replaces the notion of “sound-image;” defining it as the mark that stands in for what is being signified. The signifier is also referred to by Saussure as another name for symbol. The symbol is a signifier and not a sign because it only stands for an idea; absent of that idea the object or word would mean nothing. A symbol can only become part of a sign when a concept or idea is attached to it. An example of the relationship between the signified and the signifier is a common stop sign. The signified is the idea that an individual must halt their vehicle when the sign is seen. However, that idea cannot be conveyed without a concrete backing in the physical. Therefore, the signifier, or the signature red octagon, acts as a representation of

the idea within a cultural construct. Both elements create the sign because the abstract idea is conveyed through a physical object.

Mythic Language

Roland Barthes expanded upon Saussure's work and applied the concepts of semiotics to the language that creates myth. According to Barthes, myth is a type of speech. As such, myth can exist in any language as long as it adheres to the form of the discourse (Barthes 109). However, myth is prevalent in the language of humans because it is rooted in historical significance (110). Myth signifies familiar narratives that hold meaning within a culture and becomes an effective form of communication because of the broad participation in the signified by the individuals within the culture. "Mythical speech is made of a material which has *already* been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication: it is because all the materials of myth (whether pictorial or written) presuppose a signifying consciousness that one can reason about them while discounting their substance (110). In other words, myth informs the perspectives of individuals within a culture based on the reproduction of narrative themes. Myth assumes the comprehension of its audience because it deals with themes that are widely known in a culture. In the United States, an example of this is the myth of the American Dream. The myth is rooted in history because of its beginnings in the nineteenth century, but its themes still inform contemporary American values and its signifiers are recognizable to most people. This examination of myth led Barthes to the conclusion that myth, like other forms of language, was founded in semiotic structures. "This is the case with mythology: it is a part both of semiology inasmuch as it is a formal science, and of ideology inasmuch as it is a historical science: it studies ideas-in-form" (112).

Barthes contemplated semiotics in myth with respect to Saussure's formal elements of the discipline; however, Barthes had to adapt the idea of the signifier and the signified to fit the context of myth. In mythic structure, Barthes claims that the signifier is a combination of both meaning and form (Barthes 117). The meaning of the signifier is entrenched in a prebuilt signification or historical context. "As meaning, the signifier already postulates a reading. The meaning is *already* complete; it postulates a kind of knowledge, a past, a memory, a comparative order of facts, ideas, and decisions." (117). The form of the signifier is the opposite of meaning. The form pertains to the presentation of the signifier in language or imagery and "impoverishes" the meaning (118). "The form does not suppress the meaning, it only impoverishes it, it puts it at a distance, it holds it at one's disposal. The meaning loses its value, but keeps its life, from which the form of the myth will draw its nourishment" (118). Although the relationship between the meaning and the form seems contradictory, it is imperative to note that this dichotomy exists with respect to the signifier, a word or object. Sometimes a rose is a flower, a biological entity; but it is also an expression of passion. The form is the rose because it exists without history or meaning, it is only physical. The rose's meaning is the passion expressed by the rose because it has a context and a history, a memory, as Barthes describes.

The signified, in the mythic, structure is defined by Barthes as the concept. "Unlike the form, the concept is in no way abstract: it is filled with a situation. Through the concept, it is a whole new history which is implanted in the myth" (Barthes 119). In the same vein as Saussure's signified, the concept is the larger idea of the myth, but on a macro level. The concept performs a magnified role in myth because it is the culmination of all of the symbols and signifiers within the narrative. Words and objects that are a part of the mythic structure may possess a signified

idea in themselves, but the signified idea of the myth as a whole must be expressed through the concept.

Myths as semiotic systems function in two ways. First, myths are heavily laden with signs that become recognizable to the masses when exposed to the myth. Second, when the masses encounter the sign in everyday life, they associate reality with the sign's meaning in the myth. "Myths are reflected in newspaper articles, in photographs, and in advertisements. Myths, for Barthes, are semiological system that tell a story, while veiling or hiding particular meanings" (Denzin 8). However, before analyzing the usage of signs in myth, Barthes's characteristics of myth must first be enumerated. Denzin (8) outlines many characteristics of myth, but seven are crucial to the understanding of myth's function.

Myths (Barthes [1957] 1972, pp. 109-159) have the following characteristics: (1) they dress up reality and give it a sense of naturalness; (2) they are contemporary and draw on meanings that are at work in broader contemporary culture; (3) they present simple truths through simple, direct language; (4) when they present individuals, they are presented as persons with whom readers and viewers can easily identify; (5) they organize themselves into small stories that inform the reader about a segment of social experience, or an object that might be purchased, often joining object and experience; (6) they work at the level of associative meanings that attach themselves to the biography and "potential" experiences of the viewer-reader-consumer; and (7) they are personalized yet universal statements that speak directly to each reader-consumer-viewer.

Myths utilize signs in order to grant symbols cultural relevance. These symbols are ascribed meaning and become signs through grafting and assigning values and cultural associations. By doing so, the viewing public is trained to recognize symbols that represent the ideals of their culture.

For example, American culture is founded upon the myth of the "American Dream." The message of this myth informs the audience that America is a land of opportunity, and success can come to anyone who is willing to work hard and capitalize on their opportunities to attain wealth.

Part of signifying the American Dream is signifying wealth through the suburban home. Wealth in American is not contingent upon income alone. The wealthiest individuals have a high

income and the possession of assets. As such, one of the major markers, or signifiers, of wealth and the American Dream is the house. Ownership of a house represents not only the means to pay for such an expensive item, but also represents the possession of equity. However, a characteristic of myth is a narrative emptied of history. For example, the myth of the American Dream conveniently omits racial exclusion from the idea that hard work and lead to success for all. Similarly, ownership of a house is not as pleasant as it is described in the myth. The value of the house is dependent on the location and the inhabitants of the neighborhood, so merely owning a house does not necessary equate to “living the dream.” There is a distinct difference between the value of a house in the suburbs and a multi-family house in the city. Owning a house in the suburbs is a definite marker of success. Thus, a common physical manifestation of the American Dream is the suburban home.

The semiotic language of American Dream myth also implies that hard work and sweat will lead to success and the attainment of wealth. This mythic concept has influenced American values and has been reproduced in many media. Barthes critiques this concept when analyzing the film “Julius Caesar.” In the film, Barthes claims that all the men are sweating profusely, not just because of physical work, but because of intellectual work (Barthes 25). Barthes also poses the idea that the imagery of the film illustrates a standard for work ethic that should be observed by the business world. “To sweat is to think – which apparently rests on the postulate, appropriate to a nation of businessmen that thought is a violent, cataclysmic operation, of which sweat is only the most benign symptom” (25). Because the film was made in Hollywood, Barthes also comments on the American faces that are intended to represent Romans. This makes Barthes’ analysis of the film as a business model increasingly insightful because American audiences are intended to see themselves in the characters and emulate their work ethic. An adept audience

would recognize the film's relationship to the ideals established in the American Dream myth. As a result, the film would inspire the audience replicate the morals of the myth and achieve success through hard work.

Political Economy of Signs

Barthes' engagement with semiotics did not stop at the theoretical level with myth. Unlike Saussure, Barthes used semiotics and mythic language as a way to understand human interactions and behaviors. He observed the use of signs from a capitalist perspective and found that signs and mythic language were being used to take advantage of the buying habits of the masses. Semiotically, objects gained meaning when the notions of commodity and value were ascribed to them in the marketplace. Although semiotics were initially used to study how the meanings of objects interacted with daily life, the field quickly changed into a profit making trope. Barthes severely detested the use of signs in this way and resulted in his indictment of the capitalist system.

Barthes's main opposition to mythic signification in marketing was that myth was being used to reproduce a bourgeois lifestyle and ideology. Barthes opposes bourgeois ideologies because the bourgeoisie, the middle class with disposable income, participates in the consumer culture invented by corporations and influences the values of society. By using myth, the bourgeoisie can influence the public's perception of identity. "If our society is objectively the privileged field of mythic significations, it is because formally myth is the most appropriate instrument for the ideological inversion that defines this society" (Barthes 142). Mythic signification is a marketing mechanism created by the elite members of a capitalist culture in order to produce material gain. Therefore, the use of mythic language is an attempt to commodify objects and grant the audience an illusion of real life, when they are actually being

sold signifiers of ideologies. “[This] denies to people their ability to remake the world by setting narrow limits on how people are supposed to live so as not to upset the dominant order” (Robinson 3). Therefore, signs are used to support a bourgeois lifestyle by convincing the masses to emulate this lifestyle. This concept is self-sustaining because the lifestyle that is trying to be emulated is the lifestyle that is perpetuating content which inspires such feelings in the masses. According to Barthes, commodities become signs and symbols within a mythical structure that associates the commodity with the ability to enjoy such a lifestyle. Consequently, Barthes’ work with socio-semiotics was a response to the abuse of signs that was facilitated by the capitalist system.

[Barthes] distinguished between cultural phenomena per se – systems of objects which did not represent communication or language – and ideologies linked to cultural processes which were discourses that manipulated the users of culture for specific purposes, such as the sale of commodities. The discourse surrounding the use of objects, such as the language of advertising, *was* a system of communication filled with the intentionality of ideology that constituted a text. (Gottdiener 39)

Whereas Barthes and Saussure studied the object as a sign, Baudrillard studied the object as a commodity. Spurred by cultural obsessions with objects and consumerism, Baudrillard’s work sought to examine the added value of objects and what made them grow beyond their natural meaning. “The object is *nothing*...but the different types of relations and significations that converge, contradict themselves, and twist around it.” In reference to Saussure, Baudrillard maintains that an arbitrary object still lacks meaning, but the way cultures interact with the object create its value as a commodity.

“[The] new economy is based on a semiotic of signs that organized and gives meaning to the system of objects that are consumed. This political economy of signs reproduces the ‘consumer society’ or the society of consumption, as Baudrillard calls it. Social objects have become cultural objects transformed into commodities” (Denzin 5). As a response to this

commodification, Baudrillard stepped outside the boundaries of terminology set by Saussure and Barthes and infused economics into the principles of sign. “The commodity combines use and exchange value, while the sign, as noted earlier, combines the signifier and the signified. Baudrillard’s task is to merge these two structures into a single structure that may be called the *signified commodity*” (Denzin 6). Thus, the study of semiotics became a prerequisite to the study of advertising because marketing strategies commodify objects by attaching a symbolic meaning, a distinct value, and by using that meaning to appeal to a fantastical way of life that can only be supported by myth.

Baudrillard’s theories fall on the opposite side of the spectrum of Barthes because he analyzes the affect the sign has on the development of personal identity. Denzin is a middle-point for the two theorists, examining the structure of the sign and how it is converted into a meaningful commodity in advertising. For this purpose I will use both Denzin and Baudrillard in the discussion of semiotics and the formation of identity through advertising.

Using Denzin and Baudrillard, I maintain that the commodification or political economy of a sign works on a three-tiered level: narrative, myth, and sign. According to Denzin, the first level of symbolic interaction is narrative. The narrative explores the history of a commodity and provides useful information about the product. In describing the narrative elements of a bottle of Jack Daniel’s Whiskey, Denzin writes, “The story informs the reader *when* Jack Daniel’s as a whiskey came into existence, *who* its creator is, *where* it is made, *how* it is made, and *how* it is to be used, *type* of whiskey it is, and what its *quality* is. The language of this text-as-a-story is simple, direct, declarative, natural and historical” (7).

The second level of the sign is myth. This myth is emptied of history, but also reinforces a particular ideology. Baudrillard discusses the importance of ideology that sets the context for

the sign's value based on what is valued in society. This prevailing ideology influences the societal perspective on objects and establishes a framework for analyzing property. Baudrillard writes, "The real source of value and the real process of production are skipped over. It is from neglect of this social labor of sign production that ideology derives its transcendence; signs and culture appear enveloped in a 'fetishism,' a mystery equivalent to, and contemporaneous with that of the commodity" (3). In other words, myth assigns value to an object not because of the cost of labor but because of society's feelings towards it. The ideology that surrounds object is the focal point of its value.

The sign itself is the third layer of the political economy of signs. According to Baudrillard, the sign works in relation to the ideology by because it reflects the cultural values that are assigned to the ideology. The sign is the marker or physical manifestation of the ideology that is still culturally defined, but affirming for its owner. Consider a painting by Monet: the narrative elements would dictate that it is a valuable painting because of the impressionist style and the artist is deceased. On a level of myth, high society values not only impressionist art, but the high price of impressionist pieces reserves them for the rich. Therefore, in order to affirm your identity as high-class citizen and display your wealth, you must acquire a Monet because it points to the ideology of which you take part. The sign of ideology validates the identity and it's the true marker of value. Baudrillard writes, "It does not create profit, but *legitimacy* and it is with this that the art lover identifies himself by his economic sacrifice" (6). Therefore, signs are not valuable merely because of their price or their quality, but how the sign reflects the ideology of a culture and represents class as an expression of wealth.

Semiotics in Advertising

When used in the spectrum of advertising, signs are considered to be “visual rhetoric” (Scott 252). Rhetorical theory studies ability of an individual to craft an argument that will resonate with an audience using appeals to the audience’s cognitive processes. “Receivers of the message use [the] same body of cultural knowledge [as the sender] to read the message, infer the sender’s intention, evaluate the argument, and formulate a response” (253). Thus, in order to deliver an effective argument, the sender must use culturally relevant appeals, or, in the case of advertising, culturally relevant signs. Scott describes three characteristics of visual rhetoric as a way of developing an effective argument: Visual elements must be able to signify meaning in order to invent an argument, the elements must be arranged in such a way that appears realistic, and the message must be delivered with a style can provoke a positive evaluation by the viewer. From a semiotic standpoint, the most important characteristic of visual rhetoric is invention, the process by which a visual element is ascribed meaning in order to execute an argument.

Scott defines argument invention as positioning, copy strategy and concept. Inherent to the invention of the argument is the promise to deliver on brand promises. Therefore, the copy strategy must assure the audience that the symbolic imagery is not misleading. The remaining elements, positioning and concept are related. Concept defines which imagery will be used in order to convey a specific message. Positioning defines how the brand will be represented in the ad and where the symbol will live (Scott 265). Argument invention in advertising is often enthymematic, meaning the ad will not explicitly deliver the argument. Through recognition of the symbols at work in the ad in addition to the language that accompanies it, the audience is expected to formulate the argument by themselves. In this way, the myth or narrative that the consumer identifies with informs the argument. By recognizing symbols and mythic elements in an ad, the consumer can piece together the argument without explicit instruction from the brand.

“The interpretation of the text is effected through a process of selective reconciliation. That is, the reader takes into account a notion of what is reasonable to expect from the form at hand” (Culler 140).

Thus, if an Audi is pictured gliding across a snow-covered surface with ease, the reader expects that the advertiser is trying to convey information about how dependable Audi all-wheel drive is in snow. The ad does not have to spell this argument out for the reader because the symbols allow for simple interpretation. However, much more is riding on the imagery than the surface argument that Audi vehicles are good in the snow. The presence of snow in the ad defines the ideal Audi owner through signification. Audis are expensive cars, but the imagery also hints at other aspects of upper-class privilege. For example, merely being around snow implies that the driver lives in a wealthy geographic area such as New England. Also, the ad contains upper-class signifiers by representing the need to drive in snow; as if en route to a ski resort for a lavish winter vacation. All of these messages are signified in a simple Audi advertising and can be extrapolated without the presence of written text. Thus, the advertisement is enthymematic because the audience creates the argument for themselves.

Using semiotic imagery in advertising is extremely beneficial to a brand, but is contingent upon a proper and informed reading of the text by the audience. As stated in a previous chapter, advertising is based on the production or reproduction of a narrative that can be perceived by the audience. Thus, imagery is carefully selected in order to elicit a cognitive response that recognizes the narrative and understands the relevance of the narrative within the argument. Barthes reflects on the usage of signs in advertising while analyzing soap advertisements. In his examination, Barthes identifies dirt as symbolically dark and evil enemy, described with words such as “abrasive” and “damaging” while detergents and chemicals are the

clean, white saviors. (Barthes 35). This establishes a mythic structure in a conflict between hero and nemesis, and light versus dark. Additionally, Barthes extols the uses and appeal of foam in soap compounds. He claims that foam signifies luxury and satisfies a consumer desire for something light and airy, like free flowing clothing or high-priced wine (36). All of these symbols are used to impact the consumer psyche and ascribe a mythic narrative to an inanimate object such as soap. “Through variations in the selection of viewpoint, style, and context, as well as through references to or interactions with other texts and systems, these images become capable of highly sophisticated rhetorical tasks” (Scott 264). Although advertisers assume knowledge that may not exist in an entire audience, ads are intended to target individuals who can recognize certain references.

In order to guarantee the highest conversion rate of the audience, ad creators employ signs and symbols that specify a particular context and situate the argument within a relevant topic. “A black cat in the same field with a pumpkin would move the pictorial statement from pointing to objects toward referring to a ritual (Halloween)” (Scott 264). Therefore, advertisers can use visual signs and symbols to set the stage of an ad, and also to convey concepts that are vital to the argument without specifying them in written form. For example, Hirschman argues that symbols such as guns, dogs, and cars can lead to an implied argument for male “rugged individualism.” Although the ads that contain such symbols do not explicitly state that a rough, manly personality is required for the use of a certain product, the symbols mirror a lifestyle that can be recognized by the audience member who considers himself a rugged individual (Hirschman 11).

Symbols are crucial to the execution of advertising because they provide cultural context without explanation. These symbols and the intentionality of their application can be

analyzed through the study of semiotics. Using Barthes' *Mythologies* as a guide for evaluating advertising, one can identify the signifier and signified portions of a sign in order to greater understand the marketing agenda of a brand. Additionally, the analysis of these symbols can inform the unstated meaning of a commercial in reference to cultural ideologies and myths. Ultimately, the study of semiotics will prove useful in the analysis of the rising popularity of nerd advertising because it will make apparent the nerd's ability to embody multiple minority demographics through signifiers of diversity.

Chapter 6: Nerd Co-Optation in Advertising

The rise of the nerd in cinema has influenced a shift in contemporary advertising narratives that include the nerd for strategic purposes. The rising popularity of the nerd has allowed the character to become a credible spokesperson and appeal to broad audiences. But the new coexistence of nerds and traditional advertising heroes was not done by accident. The marketing benefits of the nerd far exceed that of one-dimensional characters because of a versatile identity. True to its clown heritage, the nerd is capable of shape-shifting; wearing multiple hats that can appeal to diverse demographics. Such versatility is a stark contrast to traditional spokespersons whose visual identity can inhibit the extent to which an audience identifies with them. The nerd's vast appeal is accomplished through co-opting the nerd narrative from film into an individual who can be consumed by dominant white Christian audiences, while simultaneously signifying racial, sexual, and/or religious difference.

The following chapter will discuss theories of cultural appropriation that justify the selection of the nerd as vehicle for broad audience reception and also inform the process through which the nerd narrative is refined and co-opted for mass consumption. As stated in Chapter 3, the nerd's rise to popularity was spurred by shifting modes of media production and changing expectations and qualifications for success. As a result, the nerd became a new cultural hero and merited inclusion in advertising narratives. However, the nerd's history as an outsider and figure of ridicule threatened the success of nerd advertising because it would not translate into audience identification for the dominant American audience. Theories of cultural appropriation help explain the motivations behind sanitizing the nerd for mass consumption.

Additionally, this chapter will analyze a small sample of nerd advertisements in order to introduce the genre and establish a framework for subsequent criticism. Nerd advertising

represents a niche category in advertising, but is growing in popularity. Rooted in humor, the ads are capable of diluting controversial material with laughter while maintaining spokesperson credibility.

In conjunction with the form analyses of the ad sample, a semiotic analysis will explain how the nerd can appeal to specific minority demographics despite the appearance of a homogenized character. The discipline of semiotics can facilitate the unpacking of complex symbols, particularly those used for advertising. Therefore, the nerd's agenda can be pinpointed when his symbolic actions, language, and appearance are analyzed and unpacked. This analysis can prove that although the nerd appears to be a white, heterosexual Christian, he possesses symbolic markers of minority difference such as Jewishness, and homosexuality.

Cultural Appropriation

Cultural Appropriation is the adoption of another culture's symbols, rituals, genres and artifacts (Rogers 474). According to Rogers, there are four instances in which cultural appropriation exists, each with a varying relationship between dominant and subordinate cultures. In all cases, however, cultural symbols, rituals, genres, and artifacts are implemented in a culture other than that in which they originated. The following section will briefly highlight the four categories of cultural appropriation, select the most applicable definition for the nerd's co-optation from film, and explain how and why this appropriation took place.

The act of appropriating cultural commodities can exist in four categories: cultural exchange, cultural dominance, cultural exploitation, and transculturation (Rogers 477). Cultural exchange is a mutual trade of cultural commodities that does not assume a dominant or subordinate culture. There is a neutral role of power. Cultural Dominance is the forced implementation of cultural commodities by a dominant culture onto a subordinate culture. An

example of this is the treatment of conquered territories by Christian soldiers during the Crusades. After Muslim threats were eliminated, the remaining population was forced to adopt the ideals of Christianity. Cultural exploitation is the practice of a dominant culture acquiring cultural commodities from a subordinate culture without permission or reciprocity, and to serve the benefits of the dominant culture. Finally, transculturation is the presence of cultural commodities in such a vast amount of cultures that the originator cannot be defined, resulting in a globalized form of commodities (Rogers 477).

Although the co-optation of the nerd in cinema occurred within the same larger, American culture, the act is best defined as cultural exploitation because the nerd as a symbol of outsidersness was appropriated by the dominant white culture in advertising. Cultural exploitation relies on the commodification of history. As such, when the dominant culture appropriates the history of the subordinate culture, historical fact can be manipulated in order to serve the greater interests of the dominant community (Rogers 488). “Commodification, by abstracting the value of a cultural element, necessarily removes that element from its native context, changing its meaning and function and raising concerns about cultural degradation” (488). This is the foundation of “White Redemption Rhetoric,” in which white filmmakers reinvented the history of African American struggle in the United States in order to grant white people a freedom from the so-called sin of racism.

On the same level, the dominant white culture has reinvented the history of the nerd in film, eliminating racial, religious, and other categories of “outsidersness” in favor of a representation of dominant American culture. The benefit of this co-optation is that the general public is ignorant to the shift in cultural commodities, so when the white nerd is presented in advertising, values and cultural characteristics of the nerd in film are transposed onto the white

nerd through consumer memory. Thus, if a consumer relates to the Jewish actor, Jonah Hill, the consumer is likely to transfer those feelings of identification to a character who behaves similarly, but may not have the same cultural background.

This cultural appropriation took place in order to maximize the marketing benefits of the consumer majority. In other words, if the protagonist of the ad is relatable to the dominant white culture, the brand can expect a greater consumer response than if the protagonist was dissimilar from the consumer. These efforts are made not only to directly impact sales, but also to protect the brand's image in the eyes of the majority. Hooten et al. describes how brand images are created by the majority's feelings toward the spokesperson. If a spokesperson is homosexual, the majority's views of the brand will be aligned with their views on homosexuality (1233). Thus, although it alienates minority demographics, it is safer for the brand to promote a spokesperson who can generate the highest amount of approval from the heterosexual majority. Similarly, brands can be labeled based on the characteristics of their spokesperson. If a brand uses a Jewish individual, the brand may be labeled a Jewish brand and thus repel the business of the consumers in the Christian majority.

As a result of cultural appropriation and the co-optation of the nerd in advertising, brands infuse their nerds with subtle signifiers of culture that may go unnoticed in the eyes of the majority, but resonate within specific cultural demographics. By doing so, the culturally appropriated nerd becomes a universal advertising mechanism because it allows brands to covertly target minority audiences without harming their image in the eyes of the majority.

Nerd Texts

The foundation of this analysis will be a sample of five commercials in which brands use nerd characters as protagonists. The sample informs the nerd's origin as a clown, in that the nerd

is a comedian, but also serves as a credible spokesperson through intelligence and an ability to exist in multiple demographic circles. Additionally, the sample will demonstrate how the characteristics of the nerd were borrowed from film, yet the racial, religious, and sexual facets found in a cinematic character have been sanitized for television advertising and transformed into whiteness.

In many respects, the first advertisement in the sample is an outlier and must be discussed prior to the remaining commercials. Jordan Brand's 1991 *Do You Know?* spot, starring Spike Lee, differs from the majority of the sample because the protagonist is not white, or trying to appear white. In the commercial, Spike Lee takes on the persona of Mars Blackmon, the nerdy character in Lee's 1986 film, *She's Gotta Have It*. Blackmon's mission in the ad is to reveal the secret behind Michael Jordan's leaping ability through scientific analysis. In order to do so, Blackmon seeks the help of a white professor from the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics, who gives a complex explanation of Jordan's abilities.

In the commercial, Lee begins by introducing himself as Mars Blackmon in order to remove himself from the ad and to inspire the audience to recall their memories of Blackmon from film. Lee develops his role by mimicking Blackmon's foolish antics and quirky repetition of questions. In *She's Gotta Have It*, Blackmon was well known for repeatedly calling Nola's name or asking the same question multiple times. Lee brings this character attribute into the commercial when Blackmon asks the scientist what allows Jordan to defy gravity. Blackmon concludes the question by repeating, "Do you know? Do you know? Do you know? Do you know?" Following a complex answer from the scientist, Blackmon and Jordan are left speechless. The only word Blackmon can muster is a frantic, "What?!" The scientist then imitates Blackmon when he asks, "Do you know what I mean? Do you know? Do you know? Do you know?" Lee

introduces and develops the character of Blackmon through recognizable behavior. By doing so, audience members familiar with the film can immediately ascribe the values and characteristics of Blackmon to the character in the commercial. As stated in Chapter 3, using a borrowed narrative such as this allows commercials to create character depth without explanation or background. Thus, the audience is informed of Blackmon's insightfulness and reliability that establishes trust and credibility as a spokesperson.

Although this commercial effectively demonstrates the practice of borrowing narratives from film, it differs from the remainder of the sample because Lee's character is not tailored to appeal to a white audience. This difference may be a reflection of the time period in which the spot was produced or the intended audience. In contemporary advertising, homogenized nerd characters are used in order to prevent damaging the brand image in the eyes of dominant, white demographics. However, because the brand was inspired by a black athlete, it was goal of the advertising to appeal to hip, urban audiences and college students. The audience targeting neglects the American majority audience because the effectiveness of the commercial relies on the familiarity of audience members with the film, *She's Gotta Have It*. Also, in light of Michael Jordan's stardom and universal appeal, the brand could safely assume that white people would buy Jordan sneakers in order to imitate Jordan and blackness by extension. Despite intended audience, the fact remains that Mars Blackmon was used in order to add spokesperson credibility through his relationship to a trustworthy and insightful film character and the engagement of black audiences with that character.

The second advertisement from the sample is Adidas' *AdiZero v. Mini Skirt* (2011). The commercial is set in the "AdiZero Lab" in which the protagonist is a nerdy scientist who is trying to determine the speed needed to run by a woman and cause an air wake so powerful that it

blows up her skirt. The nerd discovers that the proper speed can be reached while wearing Adidas AdiZero sneakers and prepares an experiment. The remainder of the ad is shot in slow-motion as the nerd struggles to muster athleticism and use his running speed to blow up a long series of skirts, including a human trial at the end. The ad concludes with the human woman looking violated and the nerd gloating over his discovery by endorsing the lightweight of the AdiZero.

The symbolic message of this ad functions purely on the visual level. Although the ad will inspire humor in a majority audience, it also subtly represents Jewishness. According to Sander Gilman's analysis of the Jew's Body, an effete, feminine body type and a large nose are the most prominent and recognizable physical characteristics that have evolved into stereotypes. The ad hints at Jewishness because the nerd protagonist has both a feminine body and large nose. Therefore, even though the ad does not give any traditional markers of Jewishness, like a yamaka, the audience can infer the ethnicity of the protagonist because of these defining traits. Additionally, the nerd appears Jewish because of his lack of athletic ability and awkward athletic attire. His knee-high socks and short shorts display a lack of familiarity with traditional athletic attire, and make him seem out of place.

Apart from the nerd's physical appearance, the goal of the AdiZero experiment reflects the ambitions of cinematic Jews regarding the courtship of women. As evidenced by Larry David, Woody Allen, Jonah Hill, and Jesse Eisenberg, a main pastime of Jewish nerds is the pursuit of women through superior intelligence. Thus, it comes as no surprise that the nerd scientist dedicated his intellect and resources to engage in a stunt that would expose a woman's panties. This also explains the celebration at the end of the commercial, because the nerd successfully used his mind to generate a sexually driven goal. The ad is intended to be funny, so despite its

reproduction of negative stereotypes of the Jew's body, it appeals to Jewish audiences because it places the Jewish character at the center of the narrative. Simultaneously, the ad appeals to majority audiences because the markers of Jewishness are limited and the plot is rooted in humor.

The outsider nature of the nerd is also representative of homosexuality in advertising. This theme is reflected in the sample's third advertisement, Sprint's *Epic Kiss* (2010). The goal of the commercial is to create an "epic" romantic short film that displays the video playback capabilities of Sprint's new phone. The short film consists of one scene, in which the audience finds two nerdy teenagers—a scrawny, effeminate male and an awkward female—meeting in a dimly lit alley. The pristine condition of the alley immediately tips off the audience that the characters are on a movie set and the scene is a distortion of reality. When the characters make eye contact, the female nerd throws away her glasses and lets her hair down, becoming a beautiful and confident woman. After seeing this, the male undergoes a similar transformation by casting away his retainer and glasses and revealing a hidden mane of hair. Spurred by new confidence, the transformed nerds approach each other and begin to kiss as fake rain falls around them. As the camera zooms out, the couple continues to kiss and the male nerd jumps into the female's arms and wraps his legs around her body. The short film ends with a credit reel and a shot of the phone.

The visuals of *Epic Kiss* leave room for two interpretations about the relationship between the couple: either the couple is intended to represent a homosexual relationship between two women or there is a gender-role reversal between heterosexual individuals. Regardless of the correct interpretation, the male nerd becomes emasculated in both scenarios. The key moment in the male nerd's feminization is the leap into the female's arms. This action is a typically feminine one, evidenced by the award-winning kiss in *The Notebook* (2004) to which *Epic Kiss*

bears a near perfect resemblance. Thus, by performing this traditionally female role, the male nerd surrenders his masculinity.

By surrendering his masculinity, the nerd can tacitly convey appeals to homosexual audiences. On the surface, *Epic Kiss* appears to be a scene between a heterosexual couple because male and female lovers are involved. However, when the imagery is closely analyzed, homosexual undertones, both gay and lesbian, are evident. The nerd male can accomplish this appeal without offending heterosexual audiences because his initially “straight” appearance conceals the meaning of his actions. If the audience believes the character is heterosexual, his actions—letting down long hair and jumping into his lover’s arms—can be dismissed as a social awkwardness and subsequently generate humor that can skew the perceptiveness of the audience. As discussed in Chapter 1, humor softens the ego and causes the audience to relax their judgments.

As a result, the semiotic markers of homosexuality can go unnoticed by an unsuspecting audience, but can be perceived by the demographic to which the appeal is being made. In other words, when heterosexual audiences dismiss the “Notebook Leap” as comedy, gay audiences can recognize the gender-role reversal and appreciate the imagery of a feminine male character. Similarly, the leap can covertly appeal to lesbian audiences because the transformed nerd male not only performs the female role, but “his” long hair and slender body makes him look like a woman. When the lovers begin kissing, there is no indication that the two are male and female, not female and female. Thus, the shape-shifting and comedic nature of the nerd avoids offending the majority by allowing him to take on the identities of multiple characters and conceal appeals to minority demographics in humor.

The fourth advertisement in the sample is Geico's *Geico Radio* (2011). In the commercial, the Geico Gecko is hosting a car insurance radio show. The show is co-hosted by an awkward yet enthusiastic male nerd with little interest in cars. A first-time driver calls the show and asks the gecko for practical advice on choosing the right car. If not for his co-host, the gecko would have immediately responded that the kind of car does not matter, because Geico will cover anything. Instead, the nerd co-host interjects and asks if one of the car possibilities is blue, because he feels the caller would look good in a blue car. The female caller then clarifies that her decision will be based on two different engine types, not color. After the gecko assures the caller that she can save on insurance no matter what car she buys, the co-host interrupts again with a final push for blindly selecting a blue car.

In the same vein as *Epic Kiss*, the Geico commercial presents an image of a white, presumably heterosexual male nerd who uses both visual and verbal signs to signal clandestine appeals to queer audiences. The nerd's appearance does not hold many visual indicators and could most aptly be described as metrosexual. He looks slender and effeminate, yet his wardrobe choice is fashionable. However, the nerd possesses a stress ball, an object that may seem like an arbitrary prop, but the fondling and caressing motions made by the nerd protagonist blatantly signify a relationship to testicular play and queer sex. Throughout the ad the nerd can be seen caressing and fondling the stress ball; actions that help develop the character's queer identity. Given the use of the prop, it appears that the producers of this ad included the ball intentionally as opposed to a pen or a similar office supply. In addition, the nerd discredits his masculinity by abusing the true nature and purpose of the ball. A masculine character could be expected to squeeze the ball or throw it against the wall, exhibiting a level of aggression and an appreciation

for sports. Instead, by fondling the ball, the nerd displays a queerer agenda that may tip the visual indicators from metrosexual to homosexual.

The nerd character in *Geico Radio* also conveys verbal signs that complicate his sexuality and thus enhance the credibility of the commercial in the eyes of both heterosexual and homosexual audiences. The language of the nerd is inoffensive to heterosexuals and the brand image as a whole because he remains sexually neutral. Although he never makes mention of being queer, his lack of interest in cars and fixation with color and style works to diminish his masculine male identity and affirms his identity as a metrosexual. This sexual identity is crucial to the effectiveness of the ad because it alienates the fewest amounts of people. As a metrosexual, the nerd can be a gay man, or a style-conscious straight man. This protects the brand image from criticism and also allows the brand message to reach audiences within the gay community. Thus, it is evident that the usefulness of the nerd character relies on his ability to shape shift to fit multiple molds and entertain the audiences with humor.

“Get a Mac”

The fifth advertisement from the sample merits its own section because the application of the nerd character has the most at stake for the brand, and also uses the nerd to reflect a specific brand ethos that I break down and analyze in greater depth. In conjunction with its “Think Different” marketing mantra, Apple introduced a series of television commercials that challenged PC computers not only from a functional, software perspective, but from a lifestyle perspective. The “Get a Mac” campaign embodied the alternative nature of the brand and exposed its socio-political affiliations in a way that repurposed the nerd to not only create humor, but also to appeal to social issues of broad audiences. Ostensibly, the “Get a Mac” campaign seeks to prove the benefits of the Mac computer over a PC by enlisting actors to role-play as

computers. The two computers constantly bicker about the characteristics that make them equal or superior, and the eventual winner is always Mac. I examine this campaign for its deliberate selection of the protagonist, the brand values of Apple, and the symbolic implications of commercial.

The role of Mac is played by Justin Long, a Hollywood actor who is known for playing nerd roles. To an unassuming audience it could appear that Long was selected to play Mac because of his experience in similar roles and popularity in Hollywood. However, Long represents a quintessential application of nerds in advertising because of characteristics and associations with social issues unspoken in the commercials, but quite knowable to many audience members and potential viewers of the commercial.

Justin Long's Hollywood career is that of a nerd. It began with the film *Galaxy Quest* (1999) in which he played a teenager obsessed with a "Star Trek" facsimile. Long's character is an expert on all things "Galaxy Quest" and uses his superior knowledge to guide the show's actors through an unexpected space adventure. The fascination with a fantasy world of a television show is an important aspect of a nerd because it supports the character's identity as a loner, recluse, and one obsessed with arcane knowledge. Long's career developed with similar roles such as the wimpy nerd-turned-hero in *Jeepers Creepers* (2001) and a nerdy male cheerleader in *Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story* (2004). The cheerleader role is especially important because it reflects a degree of sexual and gender ambiguity, another dimension of the nerd. In recent years, Long has shed his adolescent nerdiness and grown into the cool, mature nerd role that he portrays in the Apple commercials. This role is evident in films such as *Accepted* (2006) in which Long plays an unpopular high school slacker who creates a fictional

college for misfits and in a cameo appearance in *Zack and Miri Make a Porno* (2008) as a gay porn star.

Justin Long's career as a nerd reached its apex in *Live Free or Die Hard* (2007). In the film, Long plays a computer hacker who unintentionally jeopardizes the United States' national security with a prank. After garnering FBI attention, Long's character is apprehended by the protagonist of the *Die Hard* series, Bruce Willis' legendary character, John McClane. Long's nerd nature is epitomized by his pairing with McClane because of the clear juxtaposition of masculinity and nerdiness. One reviewer has called McClane the Paul Bunyan and John Henry of our time (Richards 1). He is a genuine folk hero—the cop who knows right from wrong, loyal to his wife and family, and willing to go alone in defense of country and family. The pairing with Long was perfect for the film because McClane gives Long's character a shot of masculinity. As a result of his exposure to McClane, Long's character learns how to be a masculine hero and the unlikely duo go forth to stave off terrorist threats. Ultimately, Long's character performs so admirably in the eyes of McClane that he not only wins his respect, but the affection of his daughter.

Long's nerd-filled filmography has established him as an unintimidating and effeminate character, yet he consistently entertains with his humor. His roles have illustrated the spectrum of nerdiness by portraying gender and sexual ambiguity in addition to an isolated obsession with computers and fantasy. Thus, his established character identity makes him a clear choice to carry the nerd role in Apple's campaigns.

Despite his film experience, Long's true appeal to the Apple brand lies not in his visible Hollywood identity, but in his unspoken personal character and relation to social issues. Long is of Italian descent and his tan, Mediterranean look conveys an antithesis to anglo-normativity and

establishes him as an outsider. Additionally, Long's slender, effeminate body type softens his image and creates the possibility of sexual ambiguity. Beginning in the 1980s and continuing into the 2000s, this sexual ambiguity became an image of metrosexuality or bisexuality. In 1994, Mark Simpson's "Here Come the Mirror Men" first reportedly used the term metrosexuality. In the article, Simpson describes metrosexuality as an extension of the "gay lifestyle" in the 80s; "the single man living in the metropolis and taking himself as his own love object" (Simpson 1). This narcissistic relationship caught on in the heterosexual world and begot the rise of a new, male shopper culture in which straight men developed the desire to dress fashionably and perfect their physical appearances. Sexual ambiguity was central to this lifestyle. Although many definitions of metrosexuality dictate that it is a heterosexual lifestyle that mimics the gay community, Simpson maintains that sexual preference is undefined. "Metrosexual man might prefer women, he might prefer men, but when it's all said and done nothing comes between him and his reflection" (Simpson 1). Therefore, the metrosexual is an outsider to traditional heteronormativity. He has the ability to transcend the barriers of sexuality because he can be both heterosexual and homosexual, but his true identity is ambiguous and narcissistic.

By extension, Long's reputation and sexual identity is steeped in ambiguity. Although many sources claim that Long is heterosexual, he neither confirms nor denies any rumors about his sexual preferences. The phrase, "is Justin Long gay?" yields over 5.5 million Google Search results and is the subject of enumerable internet forum discussions. Although these searches yield inconclusive results, it is worth noting that there is a sizable portion of Long's fan base that is seeking to resolve his ambiguity and classify his sexual preferences within the context of established binaries. In light of this, Long can most aptly be described as a metrosexual; he does

not associate with a specific sexuality, but his feminine and fashionable appearance creates curiosity and suspicion in many audience members.

Long's sexual ambiguity is compounded by his Gay Rights activism and pursuit of marriage equality. The most notable example is a *Devin & Glenn* (2010), a pro gay marriage commercial starring Long as a gay man. In the three-minute video, Long meets a lover at a Gay Pride Parade and eventually marries him. As their marriage progresses, the couple's relationship moves from intensely sexual and exciting to dull and boring; a mirror of stereotypical heterosexual marriage. The commercial concludes with Long and his partner observing a young, flamboyant gay couple. Long and his husband look upon the young gay couple with disdain. As the ad fades to black, the audience is presented with the humorous tagline, "If you disagree with the homosexual lifestyle, support overturning Prop 8 and make them get married like the rest of us."

It is clear that Long's on-screen persona, coupled with his sexual ambiguity and role as an activist were not impediments to him being the face of the Apple brand, one of the largest companies in America and the world. In fact, it is likely that Long was strategically selected for his popularity and his relation to social issues. By doing so, Apple can align their brand not only with a well-liked individual, but one who also reflects the corporate ethos of the brand as creative and tolerant of all sexual lifestyles.

The Apple brand is highly invested in its reputation for creativity. In a computer market that was dominated by Microsoft's PC platform, Apple sought to break the mold of computers made exclusively for business purposes. This brand ethos is a reflection of what Richard Florida calls, "The Rise of the Creative Class." According to Florida, a creative individual is a critical thinker and a problem solver, one who is presented with unique problems but provides equally

unique answers. The Creative Class, comprised of “knowledge workers” such as artists, engineers, software programmers and doctors works in opposition to the “Service Class,” or professional class that includes individuals trained for a specific task that often includes physical labor (Florida 67). Florida’s definition of a creative individual also includes a set of core values. Individuality, meritocracy, and diversity are the three core values that not only describe the Creative Class, but also suggest a level of social tolerance that may not exist in traditional corporate America.

Although it is a common misconception that the Creative Class is defined by gay individuals, scholars have studied the tenuous connection between homosexuality and creativity. Specifically, Florida’s use of the “Gay Index” explains how creative, high-tech industries spring up in areas that are highly populated by the gay community. Creativity is not inextricably linked to homosexuality in that creative industry is consumed by gay people, but the results of the “Gay Index” show that if creative industry can flourish in a gay-friendly location, tolerance and acceptance must be crucial values to the brands and their workers (Florida 256). “The predictive power of the Gay Index does not somehow depend on the prevalence of gays in high-tech industry. It simply represents a leading indicator of a place that is open and tolerant. These qualities are important to high-tech workers and [the] Creative Class in general” (258). Therefore, by staking a claim in the Creative Class, Apple associates itself with these core values of tolerance and targets the kind of customer who not only thinks intellectually, but also critically engages with social issues such as gay rights.

In order to compete in the creative realm, Apple must situate itself as the most intellectual and socially engaged brand in its market. As such, being creative is Apple’s primary goal in both its corporate philosophy and marketing strategy. Creativity as a brand image entails embodying

the core values of the Creative Class. Apple accomplishes this by producing a product that defies conventions for traditional computers, making their units fun and capable of non-business functions like filmmaking and graphic design. This reflects values of individuality, because Apple products are unlike any computer, and meritocracy, because Apple desires greatness not just because they are different, but because their products are superior to PCs.

Also, Apple executes the core values of the Creative Class through its treatment of gay employees. Starting in 1992, Apple instated healthcare benefits for gay couples in order to fulfill the “company’s commitment to diversity and [become] a model of social responsibility” (O’camb 1). The intentional use of “diversity” in the corporate value structure shows an effort to perpetuate Creative Class values by supporting homosexual lifestyles. Currently, Apple is able to display its acceptance of gay people because their new CEO, Tim Cook, is openly gay. However, as stated earlier, it is not Apple’s goal to merely be gay friendly or exclusively innovative; their goal is to be creative first, and allow the secondary pieces, such as the core values of the Creative Class, to follow. This maximizes their marketing strategy because in appealing to a creative audience as a whole, they are able to simultaneously appeal to creative sub-demographics.

The “Get a Mac” campaign seeks to reflect Apple’s place in the Creative Class and distinguish their exciting product from the mundane function of PCs. The campaign ran from 2006 through 2009 and consisted of 66 30-second ads in which Mac and PC compared their software capabilities. PC is played by a rotund middle-aged man who is always seen in various beige and earth-tone suits. This image is contrasted by Justin Long’s Mac character, who is slender and consistently dressed in fashionable yet informal attire. The physical appearances suggest that the PC mold is uptight, corporate and boring, while Mac is youthful, creative and possibly metrosexual. As stated earlier, Long is perfect for this role because his sexual ambiguity

espouses a sense of sexual tolerance and his metrosexual appearance reflects Florida's description of the creative fashion sense in the "no collar workplace" (116). The physical appearances of the two characters alone begin to align Apple with the Creative Class and relegate PCs to the Service Class.

Also, the comedic dynamic of the slender and fat duo is a descendent of famous Hollywood pairings such as Abbott and Costello, Laurel and Hardy, and the contemporary nerd duo of Jonah Hill and Michael Cera. This comic relationship is important because it displays how advertising uses established film narratives in order to provide character context without stating it. Merely showing fat and thin can remind audiences of famous comedy duos in film and immediately have an understanding of the dynamic between Mac and PC. Also, the comic pairing is important to the brand ethos of Apple because of the unstated sexual undertones of the relationship. In *The Celluloid Closet* (1981) Russo claims that there is an unspoken homoeroticism at work between fat and slim comedy duos. "In the films of Laurel and Hardy, their relationship was given a sweet and very real loving dimension. The two often wound up in bed together, and their wives were almost always portrayed as obstacles to their friendship. The homosexuality was unmistakably there. (Russo 73-74). Similarly, Mac and PC share a tacit bond that is recognizable to select audiences. This homoerotic relationship is important to suggest an aura of tolerance in the Apple brand and is specifically noticeable in commercials such as *Counselor* (2006). In the ad, the duo attends what appears to be couples' therapy because PC laments how much more fun and creative Mac is. The theme that Mac is more fun and capable of creative projects is recurring throughout the 66 ads in the campaign.

While the entire campaign is largely repetitive thematically, this analysis will focus on one commercial, entitled *Network* (2006). This ad was chosen for its explicit signifiers of sexual

preference and archetypal nerd behavior. The ad begins with Mac and PC enjoyably holding hands. PC comments that they have “a network going on” to which Mac replies, “We speak each other’s language.” This is the first instance in which the audience sees a pleasant relationship between the two characters. The mood is broken when an Asian woman walks up to Mac and starts holding his hand as well. PC is puzzled by this, and Mac states that he can establish networks with PCs and foreign products alike, such as a new Japanese digital camera. Mac proceeds to speak Japanese with the woman and later tells PC that he can speak her language because “Everything kind of works with a Mac.” The commercial ends with PC desperately trying to contact the woman, but uses the wrong language.

Apple, like other brands in this sample, uses a nerd character in order to portray metrosexuality. By doing so, the nerd appears straight but also has the potential to be queer. This allows for greater spokesperson versatility because the targeted demographic can cross boundaries of sexuality. This is extremely important to the ethos of the Apple brand because as the progressive and hip alternative to PC computers, Apple must maintain its relationship to the core values of the Creative Class. This goal is served through the selection of Justin Long as the brand spokesperson.

This image of Mac as metrosexual plays up the image of the nerd as a trickster. The trickster functions through his relationship with outsidership, and Long’s identity as both sexually ambiguous and non-anglo classifies him as an outsider to binaries of sexuality and categories of race. This ambiguous identity grants him the ability to transcend boundaries of race and sexuality in order to connect to both PC and the Japanese woman.

As a trickster, Mac/Long crosses racial boundaries. As a shape-shifter, the Trickster identity is not firmly planted in one realm or another. Although this ambiguity prevents Long

from being seen as wholly one race, such as white or Japanese, the combination of ethnicity in his Mediterranean appearance affords him the luxury of being part of both races. In the commercial, the dual belonging is expressed through Long's elimination of a language barrier. He successfully engages both his white identity and ethnic identity by seamlessly transitioning between languages and maintaining friendly relationships between PC and the Japanese woman.

As a trickster, Long coincidentally performs a stereotypical function of the nerd in garnering the attention of an Asian woman. This is a recurring theme in nerd cinema and appears to have been carried over to advertising in "Network." In films such as *The Social Network* (2010) and *Live Free or Die Hard* (2007) highly intellectual nerds are seen with Asian women as the prize for their superior intelligence. In *The Social Network* the acquisition of an Asian girlfriend is a marker of success in Facebook's early years. Once the website becomes a hit on Harvard's campus, the brain-power of Mark Zuckerberg and his cofounders is rewarded with the attention of female groupies, the most preferable of whom are Asian women. Similarly, in the 2007 film, the nemesis' lover and assistant is a woman of Asian descent. Although the nemesis is evil, he represents a villain whose modus operandi is technological terrorism. Thus, he is an evil nerd. Because he has reached such a level of intellectual proficiency, he becomes deserving of an Asian counterpart. In true nerd fashion, when Mac's intellect supersedes that of PC, Long's character is rewarded with an Asian woman.

Despite his supposed female companion, Long maintains his Trickster identity by conveying sexual ambiguity through the symbolic imagery and language of the "Network" commercial. At the beginning, the audience sees Long holding hands with another man, and commenting on how they are compatible together. At first glance, it appears that Long and PC have a queer relationship, such as the one Russo relates to Laurel and Hardy. However, when the

Japanese woman enters the picture, Long connects with her as well, qualifying his actions with the statement, “Everything kind of works with a Mac.” Thus, the identifiers of sexuality become skewed because Long does not specify his orientation. Instead, he leaves space for all possibilities because Mac computers accept all forms of customers. This makes the application of the nerd very effective for Apple because Long does not admit to having a homosexual relationship and appeals to the heteronormative masses as a result. Simultaneously, Long does not dismiss the idea of bisexuality or any other type of sexual orientation because Mac can work with everything. The placement of Justin Long as a nerd character gives the Apple brand broader appeal because his shape-shifting abilities allow the brand to maintain the core values of the Creative Class. The Creative Class is young and hip. They are not 1960s and 70s corporate culture, but one adventurous, bold and they refuse to accept readymade categories of race, sexuality, and ethnicity.

The co-optation of the nerd in advertising is a result of cultural appropriation that occurred to protect brand images from spokespersons from minority demographics. However, in order to maintain a brand influence within minority communities, the co-opted nerd features markers of cultural difference that can be unpacked through semiotic analysis. Due to these hidden symbols, the nerd possesses the ability to entertain majority audiences with humor, maintain speaker credibility, and also send appeals to minority demographics without alerting the masses and damaging the brand image. From a rhetorical perspective, broad appeal solidifies the nerd as a nearly perfect spokesperson because his versatile, metrosexual image alienates the fewest amount of audience members. He allows ads to target a specific audience through an ostensible relationship to the masses, yet maintains covert, symbolic signification to minorities.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

There is no way to guarantee a positive audience reaction to a commercial and there will always be an audience member who cannot relate to even the most popular spokesperson. The purpose of discussing the nerd was to illustrate the rising popularity and rhetorical effectiveness of this new spokesperson who is breaking down barriers of exclusion by appealing to large audiences through superficial whiteness and muted markers of cultural diversity. However, even nerd characters may alienate audiences such as the business class who can be turned off by overwhelming expressions of creativity or the ultra-masculine class who refuses to buy a product from a wimp. What the rise of the nerd has made clear is that brands are making an effort to remove the molds of traditional male heroism and adapt to contemporary measures of success and likeability by featuring spokespersons that are more accessible and possess a low probability of offending audiences.

Ultimately, the success of a brand relies on its reputation from advertising and, by extension, the effectiveness of the spokesperson. It is the role of the spokesperson to be liked by the audience and champion relevant brand values. In the case of Justin Long and Apple ads, not only was Long recognizable and popular, but his physical appearance and stance on social issues made him the ideal face of a brand striving to market itself to the Creative Class. By creating a spokesperson who is relatable to the target audience, the brand establishes trust and credibility that allows the message and values of the company to be accepted by viewers. The nerd does this effectively because his archetypal persona of the trickster affords him inherent wisdom and trustworthiness, and humor that breaks down the egos of the audience and softens their criticism and judgment. As a shape-shifter the nerd is capable of simultaneously representing social taboos

such race, religion, and sexuality through symbols and cultural markers. This ability to tackle controversial issues and represent brand values makes the nerd an effective brand representative.

The nerd's effectiveness also stems from its history in Hollywood cinema. As an archetypal character, there have always been representations of the nerd as an outsider and as an ancillary figure in relation to the hero. In light of this outsidership, the nerd was often portrayed by minority figures, reproducing the hierarchy of social structure. However, the nerd fortuitously rose to prominence as a protagonist in light of the coinciding technological revolution in America and the redistribution of power for minority filmmakers in the 1980s.

The technological revolution and rise of Richard Florida's Creative Class redefined the role models of fiscal success in the United States by placing the power with professional thinkers. Computer technology visionaries such as Bill Gates and Steve Jobs became the faces of the new hero class, and in so doing, influenced the physical, effeminate characteristics of the nerd. In Hollywood, minority filmmakers were rose to prominence as their films reached new levels of acceptance. In response to the shift in modes of production, filmmakers no longer needed to recreate the traditional American hero. They were free to cast lead roles that were reflections of themselves, expressed as the nerd. This popularity gave rise to a new standard of comedy in contemporary films in which the nerd is the prominent character.

The nerd's influence in contemporary cinema merited an extension into television advertising. Two major components of commercials that benefit from nerd media are the construction of narrative and persuasive appeals through the spokesperson. In 30-60 seconds, an advertisement must place a product within a narrative, convince the audience that the product is high-quality, and inspire trust and loyalty to the brand. This can only be done if certain aspects of the commercial can go unstated, such as the context of the nerd and his credibility as a speaker.

Commercials borrow film narratives, such as the nerd, in order to supply background information that stems from film. Because of the nerd's prominence in contemporary film, the average audience member will have seen examples of nerd media and be capable of understanding the character without explanation. Similarly, the nerd's credibility as a spokesperson is borrowed from film. Thus, the audience is more inclined to accept the nerd because his on-screen persona is funny, insightful, and truthful.

In addition to reproducing narratives, commercials use symbols in order to enhance the depth of the narrative without divulging the details. These symbols may not resonate with all audiences, but are paramount to the function of the nerd. Using semiotic analysis developed by Saussure and Barthes, one can unravel the hidden messages and meanings behind the nerd's appearance and actions. According to Barthes, advertisements capitalize on the use of symbols to manipulate an unsuspecting audience. The nerd is proof of this because it symbolizes outsidership. Inherent to this outsidership is the embodiment of the identity outsiders in American history such as Jews, African Americans, and Gays. Even though the nerd appears to be white, he can still symbolize a member of a minority demographic.

The nerd functions as a vehicle for broad appeal because it is co-opted from a representation of minorities into a symbol of adulation for majority audiences. This co-optation occurred in order for white culture to claim the popularity of the nerd in film. However, the nerd in film is a marker of non-whiteness and non-normativity. In order for the nerd to be used as a symbol for the white population, it needed to be stripped of its non-white identifiers and transformed into an image of homogeneity. By doing this, brands could safely capitalize on the contemporary popularity of the nerd without embracing its former associations to minorities.

Brands continued to expand the social reach of the nerd by embedding the character with tacit symbols of diversity that would most likely go unnoticed to majority viewers, but perceived by minority audiences. In this way, brands could market the nerd to multiple demographics even though they were ostensibly marketing to one. This effort was aided by the ambiguity of the nerd, in that the nerd could not be easily classified by race, religion, or sexuality. This ambiguity gives creative license to the creators of the advertisement because the nerd can project himself onto multiple audiences without making his true purpose known. For example, Justin Long can be intended to appeal to gay audiences because of his physical appearance, but this may not be apparent to heterosexual audiences because there is nothing concrete about his character that classifies his sexuality. Utilizing ambiguity has transformed the nerd into a popular spokesperson and translated into rhetorical success because of his appeal to broad audiences.

Although the nerd is a useful tool for signifying homosexuality in heterosexual form, the exigence for the nerd may cease to exist in coming years. Brands take advantage of the nerd's unisexual appeal because it does not force an association to the gay community that may be controversial in the eyes of the majority. However, as gay rights continue to take hold in America and tolerance rises with the Creative Class, one can postulate that the need for the nerd will dissipate when brands no longer fear the stigma of going against the majority. In the span of ten years, the realm of advertising has transitioned from exclusively heterosexual to a mix of sexual ambiguity. If the nerd continues to grow in popularity, the boundaries of the gay community could be destroyed, and the need for the nerd eliminated. But, while brands still wrestle with demographic targeting, the nerd remains the most versatile spokesperson in advertising.

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